



FINAL

Mid-Term Review of Australia's APEC Support Program (AASP)

January 2025

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ACRONYMS LIST

AASP	Australia's APEC Support Program
ABAC	APEC Business Advisory Council
ALM	APEC and Latin America branch (DFAT)
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APS	Australian Public Service
ASCR	APEC Services Competitiveness Roadmap
CTI	Committee on Trade and Investment
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
DCCEEW	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DPOs	Disabled Peoples Organisations
EOPO	End of Program Outcomes
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
GOS	Group on Services
GRIT	Growing Indigenous Business Through Trade
IDCs	Inter-Departmental Committees
IDP	Australia's International Development Policy
IMR	Investment Monitoring Report
KII	Key Informant Interview
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MC	Managing Contractor
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MTR	Mid Term Review
MRA	Mutual Recognition Agreement
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPWE	Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy
PSEAH	Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
QRM	Quarantine Regulators Meeting
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises
SOM	Senior Officials' Meeting
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STRI	Services Trade Restrictiveness Index
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
TOC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
WEF	World Economic Forum
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The program under review is Australia's APEC Support Program (AASP) (June 2022 - June 2026). The AASP is designed to support initiatives that build the capacities of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) developing economies in economic and trade policy development aligned with Australia's long-term priorities within APEC consistent with the effective and efficient use of Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Purpose

The primary objective of the Mid-Term Review (MTR) is to assess the AASP's progress towards the Intermediate and End of Program Outcomes (EoPOs) from June 2022 until July

2024 (mid-way through the program). In so doing, the MTR will also assess performance, inform learning, and propose recommendations to help guide decision making regarding current and future programming for the investment.

Approach

As set out in the Scope of Work, the MTR was conducted using a mixed-methods approach (largely through in-person interviews, although some interviews were conducted remotely), using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), extensive review of project documentation (including Project Completion Reports), an online survey of participants, and the preparation of four case studies. In total, more than 50 informants participated in Key Informant Interviews.

Findings

Effectiveness

The AASP has made notable gains under each of its five Intermediate Outcomes¹ and is making strong progress towards its two End of Program Outcomes (EoPOs).

Intermediate Outcome 1: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of an open and rules-based trade and investment environment by 2026

The AASP has supported a growing body of work to help progress the implementation of an open, rules-based trade and investment environment, and AASP projects have been effective in raising the importance of international standards to enhance rules-based trade. Key projects included creating an APEC-wide agreement on the definition of logistics-related services to allow for APEC economies to have a better understanding of the impact of logistics-related services on the movement of essential goods; supporting economies in clarifying their obligations towards foreign investors and investor-state dispute resolution; facilitating the development of a common APEC understanding of what constitutes an environmental good; advocating for economies to adopt international AI norms and standards; and raising awareness of circular economy standards for more sustainable trade.

Intermediate Outcome 2: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026

Australia is widely considered to be leading the work on trade and structural reforms in the services sector within APEC, supported by a multiyear project funded through the AASP.

AASP has also been instrumental in supporting Australia's leadership on APEC's work in Mutual Recognition Agreements. The AASP has also helped strengthen biosecurity risk management within APEC economies, enhanced awareness of effective food safety risk communication within APEC economies and assisted in shaping current deliberations on how to advance APEC's work to address the impacts and costs of marine debris. By contributing to the *Enhanced APEC Agenda for the Structural Sub-fund*, the AASP supports improving the design and performance of regulatory systems in developing economies.

Intermediate Outcome 3: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026

A growing number of AASP projects are ensuring that key building blocks of digital trade are being developed to ensure more economies, including developing economies, align with international standards and norms. AASP is also helping to raise awareness of the value of e-invoicing for cross-border interoperability, and the benefits of paperless trade through the use of electronic trade documentation. Focusing specifically on small and medium enterprises, AASP has been facilitating the adoption of emerging digital technologies to enhance the operational efficiency and global competitiveness of these enterprises. The AASP has also enabled dialogue on how international standards can support good governance of AI and promote operationalising AI solutions in the APEC region.

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- ¹APEC developing economies progressing implementation of an open and rules-based multilateral trade and investment environment by 2026
 - APEC developing economies progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026
 - APEC developing economies progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026
 - Gender equality, disability and Indigenous inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, M&E, and analysis
 - APEC developing economies reporting the contribution of AASP as valuable

Intermediate Outcome 4: Gender equality and disability equity and inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, M&E, and analysis

The AASP demonstrates a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming, both in the design of all projects and in actively pursuing projects that focus on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. On average, more women than men participated in projects (57% of all participants were women), and more women than men presented at events as speakers (54% of all speakers were women). AASP's work is closely aligned with the work of the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE - led by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and which Australia is the chair of for the period 2023 to 2024). By providing voluntary contributions to the Women and Economy sub-fund, the AASP supports the integration of gender perspectives across the APEC agenda and helps APEC address barriers to women's economic participation region.

AASP has rapidly expanded its portfolio of projects advocating for gender equality within APEC in 2023-2024. AASP's projects have provided training, policy briefs, non-binding guidelines and toolkits to help government and public officials, civil society organisations, and academics in developing economies better understand economic decisions to support equitable growth.

Disability inclusion remains a challenge for the AASP, and there has been little change since the 2022 and 2023 analysis which found that disability inclusion is primarily focused on the provision of reasonable physical accommodation options for participants with a disability. It is therefore critical that the AASP implements the relevant recommendations from the GEDSI Analysis (and, most importantly, Australia's forthcoming [International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy](#)), including that the AASP 'mainstreams disability perspectives into broader project spaces', actively considers ways to consult with Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs) where applicable, and

funds one or more specific disability inclusion projects in the current phase.

With respect to other social inclusion aspects, the AASP has significantly increased its focus on empowering Indigenous Peoples, including 'leveraging learnings from other economies' as recommended in the 2023 AASP GEDSI Analysis. The AASP has supported several successful projects where Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses have identified shared challenges and new areas for collaboration, discussed innovative approaches to grow Indigenous trade, created networks and incorporated Indigenous views into APEC's work on trade and investment. Notwithstanding this success, the AASP in early 2024 commissioned a scoping study to outline potential priorities to guide Australia's future work on Indigenous international trade and investment, particularly in the APEC region. While the study acknowledges that the level of activity and policy discussion has increased over the last two years, it judiciously concludes that future programming must be 'informed by ongoing consultation with Indigenous representatives and relevant agencies' and that 'Australian officials should continue to pursue policy dialogues in APEC across key themes and work directly with Indigenous businesses in priority economies'.

Intermediate Outcome 5: APEC developing economies reporting the contribution of AASP as valuable

The mean satisfaction score for all completed AASP projects is a very high 4.5 out of a maximum score of 5. Participants have consistently rated AASP projects highly, reporting high levels of satisfaction with both the relevance of the topics addressed in the respective projects and the utility of the knowledge shared through these projects. All four case studies noted the value of the AASP to developing economies.

End of Program Outcome 1: Regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia's broader trade and investment agenda is strengthened to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies.

There is clear evidence that despite the relatively short time period of the majority of the AASP self-funded projects, the program is making strong progress towards EoPO 1. By aligning with Australia's priorities within APEC, the AASP is also helping developing economies realise their own ambitions with respect to inclusive growth. The AASP has helped to strengthen regional economic integration, including through increasing capacities in developing economies regarding bilateral and free trade agreements (FTAs). The AASP has also promoted structural reform to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies. In addition, the AASP is having a notable impact on policy development through the provision of critical building blocks necessary for economic and structural reform.

End of Program Outcome 2: Australia's influence within APEC and across the region is enhanced to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies.

Australian leadership and capacity-building offerings in APEC are regarded as best practice by key informants, with self-funded projects delivered by the AASP enhancing Australia's reputation as a robust capacity-building and technical cooperation partner within the APEC region. Australia is seen as leading APEC's work on several key policy priorities, taking the initiative on crucial aspects such as services and structural reform, which benefit all APEC economies. Interviews with Australia's partners within APEC support the view that Australia's contributions are valuable and agree that the AASP bolsters Australia's influence within APEC, promoting open and free rules-based trading systems that yield mutual benefits for participating economies.

Efficiency

The AASP is on track to expend as expected against the full investment by its conclusion in June 2026. The AASP has ensured a relatively balanced portfolio across the key priorities of the program. The program, however, will need to be continually proactive in ensuring that the pipeline continues to maintain a balanced portfolio as it risks not having sufficient projects generated by whole-of-government partners due to increasing resourcing constraints raised by these partners. Within DFAT, the program needs to carefully prioritise projects that address Australia's APEC priorities and intended AASP outcomes in a balanced fashion (i.e. avoid overrepresentation of some projects for one priority and neglect projects for others).

The AASP has improved systems and processes internally to enhance the efficiency of the program and has enhanced its information sharing on the processes (including revised project templates, a step-by-step guide to project proposal preparation and implementation, and regular interaction with whole-of-government partners).

The AASP provides support to the APEC Secretariat by funding the position of APEC's Project Management Unit (PMU) Director. In that role, an Australian official is seconded to oversee the implementation of APEC funds - including funds provided by Australia. PMU has implemented various approaches to improve efficiency, including introducing new online tools for project management and training.

Proactive early planning of a pipeline of activities and ramped-up communication efforts offer ample flexibility for the consideration and embrace of innovative approaches and activities, thus ensuring better value for our ODA investment. The AASP has implemented a number of steps to ensure the efficient delivery of projects, including leveraging hybrid and innovative ways to enhance capacity building, developing a program database of experts, and hosting events alongside face-to-face meetings of key APEC committees. When necessary, AASP has

been adaptive and responsive to changing needs and has pivoted to address changes in context. Signing the extension of the contract with the Advisory Support contractor for another 12 months has also ensured continuity of additional external technical assistance required to manage the program.

Risks and Safeguards

The AASP is a low-risk program. The Investment Manager, in collaboration with the Managing Contractor (MC), performs routine assessments of the risk register, conducts risk assessments for each proposed project, and considers risk and safeguards as part of the project proposal assessment stages. The DFAT Investment Manager led the drafting of the due diligence assessment of the APEC Secretariat in 2024. The due diligence exercise provided an opportunity to review and evaluate the risks associated with providing funds to the APEC Secretariat as Australia's funding partner and ensure DFAT has appropriate mitigation measures in place.

Additionally, the AASP-funded position of an Australian officer as APEC's PMU Director oversees the implementation of APEC Sub-Funds, including contributions to these Sub-Funds made by Australia. The PMU Director has adopted various strategies to manage risk, such as online training for officials from APEC economies and supervising staff to conduct thorough quality assessments of project proposals.

While the MTR process did not identify any major risks that can have a direct impact on the program, below are some risks worth monitoring for the remainder of the program:

- The pipeline each year needs to be carefully managed to ensure it is fully programmed early on during the financial year (preferably no later than March of each financial year). Increasingly, the pressure is growing on DFAT to design and implement more and more projects to populate the pipeline. However, it was evident from the MTR consultations that not all whole-of-government partners are suitably structured or resourced to undertake AASP projects that include

undertaking onerous procurement activities relating to implementation.

- Lack of resources within DFAT and staff turnover could have a negative impact on project progress. Where practicable, DFAT must ensure staff continuity and appropriate handover to avoid unnecessary delays in finalising projects to populate and manage the pipeline.
- All project overseers must continue to produce completion reports in a prompt manner after their project has ended. This would ensure DFAT is sufficiently capturing and reporting the project's achievements, successes and evidence/data on gender, disability, and other social inclusion markers. This evidence/data is critical to ensuring the program's achievements can be communicated more broadly to Ministers, APEC stakeholders, and the Australian public.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of the MTR is that the AASP is making strong progress towards its expected outcomes, and the management and implementation of the projects supported by the AASP have been largely effective and efficient. While the program has delivered on intermediate outcomes to date, it will need to remain proactive in ensuring it maintains a vibrant pipeline of projects across its priorities. In particular, there is a pressing need for the AASP to include projects in its pipeline that are dedicated to disability equity and inclusion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this evaluation, the recommendations for the remaining period of the program are detailed below (see Conclusion and Recommendations for the rationale behind each recommendation):

Strategic level

1. The design for the successor phase of AASP should be commenced in early 2025

2. Multi-year funding options need to be considered in the next iteration of the program, within the overall investment timeframe and budget envelope
3. In the design of the next phase, thought should be given to how to involve new partners and stakeholders with 'capacity, expertise and interest' to avoid reliance on existing whole-of-government partners
4. Support the creation of Community of Practices, where practical, for individual projects.
 - a. Designing and implementing projects that promote disability equity and inclusion in trade,
 - b. Encouraging project overseers to design innovative approaches to project delivery, and
 - c. Finalising and implementing a coordinated Communication Plan for the AASP.

Operational Level

5. DFAT to continue support through the AASP of APEC's Project Management Unit (PMU) and the Policy Support Unit (PSU)
6. AASP must continue to proactively manage its pipeline, including
 7. Project Overseers must ensure outputs are publicly available, including ensuring that
 - a. All AASP Projects routinely upload outputs onto accessible/online repositories, and
 - b. All AASP Projects routinely upload outputs onto accessible/online repositories.
 8. Continue to build a portfolio of Case Studies highlighting successful projects.



Photo by [ThisisEngineering](https://www.thisisengineering.com.au/)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is the premier economic forum in the Asia-Pacific region. The goal of APEC is to support sustainable and inclusive economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. Economic and technical cooperation is central to the operation of APEC, especially capacity building to strengthen APEC developing members' ability to deliver APEC outcomes. Australia is an active contributor to economic and technical cooperation within the APEC ecosystem. Through Australia's APEC Support Program (AASP), Australia seeks to ensure **two key outcomes** by 2040 (in line with APEC's Putrajaya Vision):

1. Regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia's broader trade and investment agenda is strengthened to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies.
2. Australia's influence within APEC and across the region is enhanced to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies.

The **AASP Design Framework** notes that the Program has **five intermediate outcomes**:

1. APEC developing economies progressing implementation of an

open and rules-based multilateral trade and investment environment by 2026

2. APEC developing economies progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026
3. APEC developing economies progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026
4. Gender equality, disability and Indigenous inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, M&E, and analysis
5. APEC developing economies reporting the contribution of AASP as valuable

The AASP has an investment value of \$18,500,000 for the four-year program (June 2022 to June 2026), and the program provides three types of support to APEC:

- Initiating our own self-funded project work through the APEC system. These projects cover a range of short-term advisory support, capacity building workshops, training, professional development, research and analysis and are, in many cases, implemented in partnership with whole-of-

government stakeholders (67% of the total investment).

- Support to ongoing enhancement of the APEC Secretariat, including through secondment of a DFAT officer to the APEC Secretariat to function as the Director of the Project Management Unit, through provision of an effectiveness grant for the Project Management Unit, and through annual funding to the APEC Policy Support Unit to support their analytical work which underpins APEC decision-making and capacity building priorities (24% of the investment).
- Contributions to funds managed by the APEC Secretariat that support capacity building. These funds – to which other economies such as the US, Japan, China, Korea and others also contribute – are then competitively allocated to project overseers from across APEC to undertake project work within APEC. Under the AASP, Australia has contributed to two sub-funds set up under the APEC Support Fund (ASF) framework to support specific priorities (the Women and Economy Sub-Fund and the Enhanced APEC Agenda for Structural Reform Sub-Fund). These funds have been used by other APEC economies to implement capacity building projects in line with the terms of reference of the respective funds and in line with APEC processes.

In supporting initiatives that promote Australia’s long-term priorities within APEC, AASP activities typically take the form of workshops (in the APEC context, a workshop is classified as a capacity building activity for APEC members), complemented by research or summary reports. Capacity building interventions within APEC focus on identifying, sharing and fostering best practice, rather than working to bring about deep institutional or systemic change. Through such interventions, AASP helps build networks among member economies, business, industry

and academia, and helps foster constructive collaboration in APEC.

1.2. Purpose and Scope

In May 2022, a Strategic Design for the AASP was undertaken to provide an overarching framework for Australia’s capacity building through APEC. The ensuing Strategic Design Framework was for a four-year period (June 2022 until June 2026) and signalled the requirement for a Mid-Term Review (MTR) to be conducted in the program’s third year i.e., in Financial Year 2024-2025. The design also clearly notes that the contributions to the two End of Program Outcomes will be assessed during a Lessons Learned Review of the program, to be held in the program’s third year (i.e. July 2024 onwards).

The purpose of the MTR, therefore, is to assess the program’s progress towards the Intermediate and End of Program Outcomes. In so doing, the MTR will also assess performance, inform learning, and propose recommendations to help guide decision making regarding current and future programming for the investment. In addition, the findings from the MTR will provide input to the 2025 Investment Monitoring Report process (IMR) and the Tier 2 reporting process.

The scope of the MTR is of projects delivered by the AASP since July 2022, noting, however, that several projects build on initiatives begun prior to July 2022 and therefore, where applicable, the report notes the long-term investment Australia has already made to building capacity within key areas of APEC.

The MTR focused on the following review questions:

1. To what extent is AASP contributing to the program’s two End of Program outcomes:
 - a. Regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia’s trade and investment priorities in the region to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies?

- b. Enhancing Australia's influence within APEC and across the region to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies?
2. To what extent are the activities of the program contributing to the achievement of the program's five Intermediate Outcomes?
3. To what extent has AASP supported mechanisms to promote inclusive, sustainable growth across targeted economies?
4. How effective is AASP in nurturing sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships between Australia and APEC developing economies?
5. To what extent has AASP promoted gender equality and women's empowerment across all its activities?
6. To what extent has AASP promoted disability and social inclusion and Indigenous Peoples' economic empowerment across all its activities?
7. What barriers/challenges may be hindering AASP's efforts to promote gender equality and social inclusion, and how effectively has the program addressed these challenges?
8. How efficient is the program, to what extent is the program promoting effective use of Australian funds within APEC, and to what extent can AASP be considered value for money?

1.3. Methodology

A multi-methods approach was used to gather evidence, including a short survey sent to a sample of activity participants and key interviews with select informants. Key informants included DFAT's APEC and Latin America Branch, selected APEC officials familiar with AASP projects, project overseers and a small sample of activity participants (see [Annex 2](#) for a full list of key informants). An

extensive review of documents was also conducted, which included reviewing IMR findings from 2023 and 2024 and APEC completion reports for projects (see [Annex 3](#) for a full list of documents reviewed).

A hybrid approach was taken to conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted in person in Canberra and also at Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) 3 (the AASP Investment Manager interviewed multiple representatives from economies attending the SOM3 meeting in Lima, Peru). For cost-efficiency purposes, interviews were also done remotely with participants.

Four case studies were also prepared as part of the MTR (see [Annex 4](#)). Each case study provides a deep dive to illustrate progress and evidence of achievement and identify key lessons learnt from priority themes. The four case studies are as follows:

- Mutual Recognition Agreement Project
- Services that support the clean-up of marine debris Project
- Women in STEM and Research
- Growing Indigenous Business through Trade

1.4. Limitations

Limitations faced during the MTR were primarily related to the busy schedule of key informants, and the need, in some instances, to conduct interviews remotely. The review team mitigated these limitations using multiple approaches to gathering evidence - by drawing on existing completion reports, drawing on the extensive project documentation (including numerous outputs that are publicly available on the APEC website), interviewing participants and project overseers to triangulate project information, and receiving written inputs and feedback from those who we could not reach for interviews. While there were instances when key informants were not available for interviews, this did not happen often, and most interviews were conducted as scheduled.

2. FINDINGS

In this section, the MTR team presents a discussion of the review findings in line with the different categories of DFAT's Investment Monitoring Report, and in response to the questions the review set out to answer. Priority recommendations are synthesised

from the findings and presented in the Recommendations Section (**Section 3**).

2.1. Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the AASP is first assessed against the five Intermediate Outcomes, and then against the AASP's two End of Program Outcomes (EoPOs).

Key Findings:

The AASP has made notable gains under each of its five Intermediate Outcomes (IO) and is making strong progress towards its two End of Program Outcomes (EoPO).

IO 1: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of an open and rules-based trade and investment environment by 2026

The AASP has supported a growing body of work to help progress the implementation of an open, rules-based trade and investment environment, and AASP projects have been effective in raising the importance of international standards to enhance rules-based trade.

IO 2: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026

Australia is widely considered to be leading the work on trade and structural reform in the services sector within APEC, supported by a multiyear project funded through the AASP. AASP has also been instrumental in supporting Australia's leadership on APEC's work in Mutual Recognition Agreements. By contributing to the *Enhanced APEC Agenda for the Structural Sub-fund*, the AASP supports improving the design and performance of regulatory systems in developing economies.

IO3: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026

A growing number of AASP projects are ensuring that key building blocks of digital trade are being developed to ensure more economies, including developing economies, align with international standards and norms.

IO 4: Gender equality and disability equity and inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, M&E, and analysis

The AASP demonstrates a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming, both in the design of all projects and in actively pursuing projects that focus on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. AASP's work is closely aligned with the work of the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy, and by providing voluntary contributions to the Women and Economy sub-fund, the AASP supports the integration of gender perspectives across the APEC agenda and helps APEC address barriers to women's economic participation region.

Disability inclusion remains a challenge for the AASP, and there has been little change since the 2022 and 2023 analysis which found that disability inclusion is primarily focused on the provision of reasonable physical accommodation options for participants with a disability. It is therefore critical that the AASP actively considers ways to consult with Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs) where applicable and funds one or more specific disability inclusion projects in the current phase.

With respect to other social inclusion aspects, the AASP has significantly increased its focus on empowering Indigenous Peoples. The AASP has supported several successful projects where Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses have identified shared challenges and new areas for collaboration, discussed innovative approaches to grow Indigenous trade, created networks and incorporated Indigenous views into APEC's work on trade and investment.

IO 5: APEC developing economies reporting the contribution of AASP as valuable

Participants have consistently rated AASP projects highly, reporting high levels of satisfaction with both the relevance of the topics addressed in the respective projects and the utility of the knowledge shared through these projects.

EoPO 1: Regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia's broader trade and investment agenda is strengthened to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies.

The AASP is making strong progress towards EoPO 1. By promoting Australia's priorities within APEC, the AASP is also helping developing economies realise their own ambitions with respect to inclusive growth. The AASP has helped to strengthen regional economic integration and has also promoted structural reform to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies.

EoPO 2: Australia's influence within APEC and across the region is enhanced to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies.

Australian leadership and capacity-building offerings in APEC are regarded as best practice by key informants, with self-funded projects delivered by the AASP enhancing Australia's reputation as a robust capacity-building and technical cooperation partner within the APEC region. Australia is seen as leading APEC's work on several key policy priorities.

Intermediate Outcome 1: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of an open and rules-based trade and investment environment by 2026

AASP has supported a body of work to better define the necessary key components of an open and rules-based trade and investment environment. The *APEC Services that Support the Movement of Essential Goods* project, for instance, led to the development of an APEC-wide agreement on the definition of logistics-related services to facilitate further targeted discussion on logistics-related services and **allow for APEC economies to have a better understanding of the impact of logistics-related services on the movement of essential goods**. These aspects were incorporated into Non-binding Guidelines on Services to Support the Movement of Essential Goods in Periods of Crisis and incorporated into work being led globally by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on this issue. The outcomes of this project also illustrate how projects supported by the AASP have secured high levels of support across the policy landscape, in this case, both OECD and WTO taking aspects of the project forward.

Through the *APEC Investment Handbook* project (first in Viet Nam, and then PNG), the AASP has been supporting economies in **clarifying their obligations towards foreign investors and investor-state dispute resolution** (a system through which economies can be sued by foreign investors for certain state actions affecting foreign direct investment). While the project has been recognised by economies for its value in helping to clarify trade negotiations, the fact that the handbook has been tailored to specific countries and then translated into local languages has enhanced its utility.

Feedback from Papua New Guinea (PNG):

PNG representative found Australia's workshop on Investment Handbook for PNG, which was also issued in TokPisin, has been immensely helpful in improving PNG's understanding of investment principles and how to go about it in a simplified way. PNG appreciates this assistance.

The *APEC Trade Policy Dialogue - Understanding of what can be considered an environmental good* project is another example of AASP **influencing policy by facilitating the development of a common APEC understanding of what constitutes an environmental good** and, therefore, supporting an open and rules-based trade and investment environment. The terms and definitions were incorporated into a voluntary, non-binding reference list of new and emerging environmental goods in line with APEC ministerial instruction. The project also helps respond to the heightened environmental challenges all APEC economies face, including climate change, which necessitate collective APEC action to promote trade in products that help to mitigate and address these challenges.

Feedback from Indonesia:

'Indonesia really appreciates Australia's work to define an environmental good...

It generated sufficient interest in Indonesia to use the learnings to start domestic discussions. Using insights from the workshop, Indonesia further engaged with the domestic stakeholders and has since then developed their own reference list of environmental goods'.

<https://www.apec.org/publications/2023/07/report-on-the-environmental-goods-trade-policy-dialogue>

Led by Standards Australia, some AASP projects have also been effective in **raising awareness of the importance of international**

standards within APEC to enhance open and rules-based trade. Standards provide internationally agreed-upon frameworks that promote consistency and compatibility. Through raising awareness of the importance of **circular economy standards for more sustainable trade**, AASP enhances knowledge of good practice among circular standards bodies, regulatory agencies, businesses and others within APEC. In response to the [Chair's Statement of the 28th APEC Small and Medium Enterprises Ministerial Meeting](#), the project also demonstrated how the adoption of circular economy measures can support value creation of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises' (MSMEs) products and services.

Intermediate Outcome 2: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026.

Australia is widely considered to be leading the work on trade and structural reforms in the services sector within APEC. AASP's long-term support to promote services and structural reform, of which a key feature has been to prioritise activities to make services regulation and policy reform in favour of openness a central focus of APEC's structural reform agenda (<https://apecservicesr.com/>), has ensured that Australia's leadership has been noted by the APEC hosts of both APEC 2022 and APEC 2023, as well as private sector participants from across the region, including the Pacific Services Coalition members. Australia's work was also reflected in the 2022 APEC Ministerial Meeting Statement, an endorsement that forms the basis for the work supported by the AASP. During the SOM 3 meetings held in Lima, Peru, in 2024, the OECD representative noted, 'Australian leadership and capacity building offerings in APEC are considered best practice'. Through a series of capacity building events, policy briefs (<https://apecservicesr.com/research/policy-briefs/>), and policy dialogues, the multi-phase *APEC Services and Structural Reform* project has been pivotal in supporting activities that

have helped to intensify regional trading partners' focus on vital regulatory and structural reform aspects of the APEC Services Competitiveness Roadmap and related work of the Digital Economy Roadmap. This project is a good example of a successful multi-year investment.

The AASP also provides invaluable support through contributing to the [Enhanced APEC Agenda for Structural Reform \(EAASR\) Sub-Fund](#). Established in 2021 with Australian funding, the Sub-Fund supports the implementation of EAASR-aligned structural reforms. Financed by the Sub-Fund, PNG's project on [Infrastructure regulation and competition from structural reform experiences in APEC](#) examined challenges of current practices and ways of improving design and performance of regulatory systems. PNG's project is a good example of funding capacity-building for reforms that benefit developing APEC economies and improve regulatory environments in Australia's trading partners in the region.

AASP's APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Agreement project is an example of **Australia's leadership on APEC's work on Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs)**. The project enhances professional mobility across APEC economies, with a focus on developing economies, thereby promoting regional integration. By increasing knowledge and promoting the utilisation of MRAs in developing economies, the multi-year *APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Agreement* project established and built on the APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Community of Practice (CoP) to enhance and support MRA practice for trade in professional services across APEC economies; maintained and updated the APEC Inventory of Mutual Recognition Agreements for Professional Qualifications and Licensure website launched in August 2021 (<https://aasc.knack.com/mra-inventory>); conducted online training on APEC Mutual Recognition and digital credentialing, building

on work completed during 2020-21 to develop the APEC Mutual Recognition Online Workshops on Digital Credentialing of Professional and Skilled Services Providers; and developed a number of policy options on MRAs².

Malaysian feedback on MRA project:

- The online capacity building programs have been extended to our Professional Services Productivity Nexus, allowing them to voluntarily participate, gain exposure, and engage in discussions on global issues
- Tools have been instrumental in supporting the implementation of trade agreements, in line with APEC's objectives for regional economic integration. Malaysia uses the toolkit as a reference when reviewing existing FTAs, finding it particularly valuable for service negotiators with limited expertise in professional services. Additionally, the MRA repository provides Malaysia with insights into MRAs completed by other economies that are of particular interest to us.
- Malaysia has initiated a study to develop a roadmap for professional bodies including setting guidelines for SMEs to venture their services abroad.

Australia, led by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), has been leading and hosting the annual Quarantine Regulators Meeting (QRM) to help APEC economies (with a strong focus on ODA-eligible economies) to **review biosecurity practices and developments in their agencies since 2008**. More than 70 delegates attended the QRM in May 2024 in Viet Nam (<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/about/news/global-biosecurity-collaboration>), including

representatives from the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation's Standards and Trade Development Facility. The project promotes a regional approach to biosecurity risk management and enhances regional integration on biosecurity interests. The project has contributed to a number of recent bilateral engagements and requests for support from economies such as Singapore and Viet Nam, for assistance in strengthening their respective biosecurity processes domestically. In addition, (noting there is no other global forum) hosting the QRM contributes to harmonising international requirements and helps strengthen biosecurity systems between trading partners within APEC. Effective biosecurity management is critical to safeguarding domestic and regional agricultural industries and maintaining resilient pest and disease-free trade networks within APEC.

Australia, led by DAFF, is leading the APEC Project on *Facilitating the Implementation of the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework and its Associated Guidelines (the Framework)* by APEC Economies. The Framework illustrates international best practices in effective food safety risk communication (<https://www.apec.org/publications/2022/02/apec-food-safety-risk-communication-framework-and-associated-guidelines>) and provides practical guidance on food safety communication to food safety regulatory authorities during food safety incidents or emergency situations, as well as in everyday food safety communications. The project is helping developing economies increase their ability to implement the framework, ensuring that the use of the framework is evidence-based and is tailored to identified barriers within their respective food systems. The project aims to develop non-binding guidelines

² Study on Mutual Recognition Agreements for Professional Qualifications and Licensure in APEC (<https://www.apec.org/publications/2024/02/mutual-recognition-agreements-for-professional-qualifications-and-licensure-in-apec-experiences-impediments-and-opportunities>); the MRA Toolkit (<https://www.apec.org/publications/2023/10/mutual-recognition-agreements-toolkit>).

for a voluntary monitoring and review mechanism to enhance food safety communication across APEC and to strengthen the Framework being used consistently across the region.

Feedback from PNG:

‘PNG finds Australian workshop in Food Safety Risk Management led by Standards Australia very useful and informative. PNG are using the workshop learnings to inform our national food standards regulation communication strategy which is currently being drafted. PNG wishes to learn and apply the best practice approaches and principles raised in food risk management workshop in their domestic effort’.

The AASPs *APEC Group on Services Project – Services that Clean-up Marine Debris* developed the brief that underpins APEC’s Non-Binding Guidelines on Services that Support the Clean-up of Marine Debris³ (and which was incorporated in the 2023 APEC Trade Ministers’ Meeting Chair’s Statement⁴). The brief and the subsequent guidelines have helped shape APEC’s current deliberations on how to advance APEC’s work on **addressing the impacts and costs of marine debris through economies working together in the region to develop a market for marine debris clean-up services**. The project raised the profile of environmental and environmentally related services within APEC and has raised awareness of the role these services play in cleaning up ocean pollution. This project has been a significant contribution from the 2022 Group on Services (GOS) to both Thailand’s host year priorities and to the implementation of the 2019 APEC Roadmap on Marine Debris for an open and rules-based multilateral trade and investment environment by 2026 (<https://www.apec.org/press/news->

[releases/2023/apec-steps-up-environmental-services-efforts-and-marine-debris-clean-up](https://www.apec.org/press/news-releases/2023/apec-steps-up-environmental-services-efforts-and-marine-debris-clean-up)).

Intermediate Outcome 3: APEC developing economies progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026

A growing number of AASP projects are ensuring that key building blocks of digital trade are being developed to ensure more economies, including developing economies, align with international standards and norms. Australia hosted a forum to bring together AI experts, industry, standards and conformance officers and policy makers to enable dialogue on how international standards can support good governance of AI and promote operationalising AI solutions in the APEC region. The AASP has increased awareness on how international standards can be used and implemented to practically help businesses and government in the APEC region to safely adopt AI at scale.

The AASP’s *APEC Project on Fostering Greater Small and Medium Enterprises’ Participation in Global Value Chains* has built awareness within MSMEs about emerging technologies and encouraged them to adopt emerging digital technologies to improve their operational efficiency, to facilitate better engagement with customers, and to enhance their overall competitiveness when doing business globally. Utilising peer-to-peer learning, the project allowed participants to identify common challenges and share potential solutions. The learnings from this experience were further reinforced through an online document repository and site visits to ports and warehouses to allow MSMEs to witness key elements in the supply chain and logistics.

³[Non-Binding Guidelines on Services that Support the Clean Up Marine Debris’](#)

⁴<https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/sectoral-ministerial-meetings/trade/2023-apec-ministers-responsible-for-trade-statement-of-the-chair/annex-2>

The AASP's work to support *A Path to Paperless Trade* represents a substantial economic opportunity for the APEC region. Differences in the legal recognition of electronic documents among APEC economies are among the biggest barriers to wider use of electronic trade documentation. By identifying the legal gaps between existing domestic regulations among APEC economies and the requisite legal foundation to adopt or maintain a legal framework that allows for electronic trade documentation, the project is facilitating the necessary steps for greater cooperation in APEC in moving towards paperless trade.

Invoicing plays an important role as one of the major processes in domestic and cross-border trade. AASP's *Implementing the Principles for the Interoperability of Electronic Invoicing Systems in the APEC Region* project has helped ensure a better understanding of the differences in the approaches of APEC economies with regards to e-invoicing, the barriers to cross-border interoperability, and what is required to implement APEC principles on this issue. In line with Australia's development priorities, the project specifically focused on raising awareness of the benefits of e-invoicing to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other marginalised businesses.

Intermediate Outcome 4: Gender equality and disability equity and inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, M&E, and analysis

Gender Equality

The AASP's *GEDSI Analysis* (September 2023) found that

'There is a **clear commitment to gender mainstreaming** evidenced within APEC's project application processes, as well as related monitoring, evaluation and data collection processes, including through the Women and the Economy Dashboard and

the work of the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE). These policies and practices force consideration of gender equality issues and/or the participation of women throughout APEC projects, regardless of whether they have a deliberate focus or target gender'.

Feedback from Mexico:

Australia is leading good work on gender quality discussions and broad work on improving gender, disability, elderly, child protection outcomes.

The workshop discussions and conversations need to go beyond just government officials. Policies and approaches will need to be developed to integrate women into economies more practically. We should be inviting speakers from ministries of labour, or from economic Ministries to discuss how they can take this agenda forward pragmatically. We need a more holistic approach to integrate women in the economy with respect to the care agenda.

AASP's approach to gender equality and women's economic empowerment is underpinned by policy guidance and international policy and practice on gender mainstreaming and is guided by the influence that Australia (led by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) currently has as chair of the PPWE (for the period 2023 to 2024). The PPWE seeks to advance the economic integration of women in the APEC region and coordinate gender activities across APEC working groups. In addition, by providing voluntary contributions to the Women and Economy sub-fund, the AASP supports the integration of gender perspectives across the APEC agenda and helps APEC address barriers to women's economic participation region.

The AASP demonstrates a strong commitment to gender equality and gender mainstreaming, both in the design of all projects and in actively pursuing projects that focus on gender equality and/or women's economic empowerment. On average, more women than men participate in projects (57% of all participants were women), and more women

than men present at events (54% of all speakers were women).

Projects such as the *APEC Care Compact* and *Developing an APEC Gender Budgeting Toolkit* are important avenues for the pursuit of Australia's PPWE priority areas. *The Non-binding APEC Care Compact* project developed a set of principles to guide APEC economies to better invest in their domestic care economy, improve work conditions and standards for care workers (who are often women) and encourage greater valuation and re-balancing of unpaid caring workload, which women disproportionately undertake. By developing a sustainable and productive care economy, women are more likely to have the ability and choice to increase their workforce participation to their preferred level.

Gender budgeting is an important analytical tool for governments to assess inequalities embedded in policies and the allocation of resources, advance outcomes on gender equality and women's economic empowerment, and shift economic policies to lead to greater economic growth. The AASP has supported capacity building and a Gender Budgeting Toolkit for APEC economies to help government and public officials, civil society organisations, and academics understand the distributional impact of economic decisions in a way that supports equitable economic growth. As the Chinese Taipei representative noted:

The workshop provided us useful experiences and methods from other economies. The workshop highlights the enabling environment for establishing Gender Budgeting, such as developing guidance materials and training to upskill government staff and build relevant knowledge and technical expertise across government. These ideas are all practical for us. The most impressive part in the workshop was the application of Gender data to identify gender issues which should be addressed. Australia has great expertise in Gender Mainstreaming approaches such as gender data and

gender budgeting, and which illustrate good models for economies to learn from. – (Chinese Taipei representative, SOM 3, 2024)

AASP has maintained its gender mainstreaming momentum and has rapidly expanded its portfolio of projects advocating for gender equality within APEC. The *APEC-Australia Women in Research Fellowship* project has supported 40 women researchers from multiple APEC developing economies (such as Malaysia, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand and China) to build their careers further in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)-related research in partnership with Australian universities. The project aligns with Australia's objective of building the capabilities of women researchers in STEM by fostering research collaborations, providing access to state-of-the-art facilities, and establishing linkages between research institutions in Australia and other APEC economies. The project aligns with the *APEC Education Strategy* (<https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/satellite/EDNET/Resources/APEC-Education-Strategy.pdf>) and, more broadly with the *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030* (<https://www.education.gov.au/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030>), notably in developing high-quality international research partnerships with APEC economies and promoting Australia as an attractive international research collaborator and partner. Feedback from the fellows highlights the significant impact the project has had on advancing the careers of women researchers by providing financial support, professional development, and exposure to new research environments. Many participants noted that the fellowship helped alleviate the financial burden of research and

childcare, enabling them to focus on their academic goals⁵.

The *La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth* lays out several key action areas to advance ‘women’s economic empowerment through access to capital and markets’. Building on previous work supported by Australia, the **AASP continues to invest in initiatives that ensure trade promotion organisations can assist women-led businesses grow globally, especially women-led Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)**. The *APEC Women’s Business Activator* pilot project, for instance, has helped women-led businesses grow globally by strengthening the capacity of private sector participants from women-led SMEs to build business competencies and help navigate barriers to both local and global markets⁶. The *Enhancing Women’s Economic Empowerment in APEC Through Greater Participation in High-skill Digitised Service Sectors* project is raising awareness and understanding of how better policies can lift women’s participation in selected service activities and how greater participation by women in higher-skilled digitally - delivered services can advance their economic empowerment. Through the development of a set of policy briefs, underpinned by evidence from case studies, these projects will guide services trade policy makers in APEC in ways to increase the participation of women in select high-skilled, digitally enabled services sectors. The *Gender Equity in Sport* project explored the issues of equity in pay and investment in women’s sports, leadership equity in sports administration, and the connection between participation and education and economic outcomes for women and girls. The *Gender Equity in Sport* project sought to foster collaboration among APEC economies to dismantle outdated stereotypes, enhance the visibility and growth of women’s sports, and advocate for fairer treatment and recognition

for women. By demonstrating how equitable practices in sports can drive broader economic empowerment, the event supported APEC’s mission for inclusive growth and gender equality across the APEC region.

Feedback from the Philippines:

The Philippines PPWE representative found the workshop hosted by Australia on Gender Equity in Sport in 2024 very informative. It presented a unique or fresh perspective on the concept of sports diplomacy and how sports can be instrumental in promoting socio-economic objectives e.g. generate economic activity, break stereotypes, inspire others to achieve, monetary rewards and improve women’s economic empowerment, voice and profile.

Disability Inclusion

The AASP’s *GEDSI Analysis* found that the AASP had a lesser focus on addressing social inclusion.

‘Broader social inclusion challenges – inclusion of Indigenous Peoples receives some attention, and disability inclusion receives almost none.’ It is clear that these categories of social inclusion are a focus of the inclusive and sustainable economic growth agenda, including through reference in key policy statements, there has been comparatively little attempt to date to mainstream these at a project level’.

The AASP’s approach to date to disability inclusion is **primarily focused on the provision of reasonable accommodation options for participants with a disability**. It is therefore critical that the AASP implements the relevant recommendations from the *GEDSI Analysis*, including that the AASP ‘mainstreams disability perspectives into broader project spaces’ and

⁵See for instance – the testimony of Dr Syuhaida Binti Ismail, <https://vimeo.com/891339954/c7f1c40852?share=copy>; ChM Aemi Syazwani Abdul Keyon, <https://vimeo.com/903177790/9823544f75>; and Fiona Morris, Counsellor (Education & Research), Department of Education, Australia, <https://vimeo.com/903586920/d1db27dc09>.

⁶For more details see <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7178932734449315841/>.

actively considers ways to consult with Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs) where applicable. In addition, the AASP should fund one or more specific disability inclusion projects in the current phase.

Indigenous economic inclusion

With respect to other Social Inclusion aspects, the AASP has significantly increased its focus on Indigenous Peoples inclusion, including ‘leveraging learnings from other economies’ as recommended in the *GEDSI Analysis*. In partnership with the World Economic Forum (WEF), the AASP has hosted a recent *Indigenous Trade Workshop* (at SOM3, August 2024), bringing together policymakers, Indigenous business leaders, entrepreneurs and academics from across the APEC region, as well as representatives from international organisations, to exchange views and share examples of policies, programs and practices that support Indigenous trade, including protecting traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. Drawing on expertise from research conducted by the WEF and the International Trade Centre, these forums have allowed Indigenous businesses to identify shared challenges, new areas for collaboration, discuss innovative approaches to grow Indigenous trade, create networks and incorporate Indigenous views into APEC’s work on trade and investment.

Feedback from participants attending Indigenous Trade Workshop

- One of the key principles that come out of this conversation is how we access the right kind of markets and enabling environments to allow Indigenous Peoples to develop their Indigenous economies
- It’s vital that buyers understand supplier diversity. It’s not about numbers, it’s about the social outcomes and the economic equity that can be built through establishing and giving contracts to Indigenous suppliers.

More specifically, **AASP’s work has demonstrated how digital tools can increase market opportunities, promote supplier**

diversity and bring Indigenous goods to international markets. AASP’s *Indigenous Digital Inclusion* project is focused on collecting case studies from APEC economies on effective initiatives and policies that promote the digital inclusion of Indigenous businesses within economies in APEC. Digital inclusion (including access, digital capability and affordability) can help enable a range of benefits, including, but not limited to, increased employment opportunities and economic connectedness for Indigenous businesses.

A further example of Australian leadership in this space has been the *Growing Indigenous Businesses Through Trade* (GRIT) projects (Phases I – III), which respond to the priorities of Ministers responsible for Small and Medium Enterprises to create ‘pathways to growth for MSMEs, including empowering MSMEs in regional and global markets through access to global value chains and through digital tools and technologies, which expand opportunities for MSMEs owned or led by individuals with unrealised economic potential, such as women, Indigenous Peoples as appropriate, persons with disabilities, and those from remote and rural communities’. AASP’s work has helped undertake an export-ready self-assessment prior to commencing training, in addition to the provision of online training and a ‘train-the-trainer’ approach to ensure the benefits of the project extend beyond immediate participants.

Benefits to GRIT Participants:

- Indigenous businesses accessing finance through contacts made with investors attending events
- Improving marketing
- Making their supply chain more efficient
- Greater exposure for SMEs via a presence on Export Council Australia’s website
- Fostering peer-to-peer networks
- Raising the profile of Indigenous chambers of commerce
- Raising the profile of databases of Indigenous suppliers and partners

At the end of 2023, the AASP commissioned a scoping study to outline potential priorities to guide Australia’s future work on Indigenous international trade and investment, particularly in the APEC region (*APEC Indigenous Trade Scoping Study*). While the study acknowledges that the level of activity and policy discussion has increased over the last two years, ‘**sensitivities in relation to Indigenous issues in some economies will require ongoing management**’. Importantly, the study identifies areas for further exploration (noting that these issues, while beyond the scope of AASP, will still need to inform future AASP programming):

- I. Need for greater coordination and information sharing on support to participate in trade.
- II. Networking Indigenous businesses, including Indigenous Commerce and Trade Groups.
- III. A market demand analysis (or communicating existing analyses) would help Indigenous businesses – both Australian and international – to understand levels of demand across APEC/international markets.

The study concludes with the recommendation⁷, that

Informed by ongoing consultation with Indigenous representatives and relevant agencies (including the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), Austrade and DFAT), Australian officials should continue to pursue policy dialogues in APEC across key themes and work directly with Indigenous businesses in priority economies.

The overarching finding with respect to GEDSI, and confirmed in interviews with key informants, is that Australia is a leader in

driving an expanded inclusivity agenda in APEC, including through its policy advocacy and supported by capacity building projects delivered under the AASP. APEC operates by consensus, and Australia has played a pivotal role in working constructively with APEC economies to support increasing prioritisation of gender equality in APEC, expanding APEC’s work program on Indigenous trade and investment, and promoting discussion of disability equity, including by showcasing Australia’s disability strategy in APEC fora, and laying the groundwork for future activities in this space.

Intermediate Outcome 5: APEC developing economies reporting the contribution of AASP as valuable.

The **mean satisfaction score for all completed AASP projects is a very high 4.5 out of a maximum score of 5** (independently verified by surveying a sample of project participants, see Figure 1). Participants have consistently rated AASP projects highly, reporting high levels of satisfaction with both the relevance of the topics addressed in the respective projects and the utility of the knowledge shared through the projects.

All four case studies noted the value of the AASP, for instance:

- **GRIT project participants:** derived benefits through accessing finance, improving the marketability and visibility of their businesses, fostering peer-to-peer networks, and raising the profile of Indigenous chambers of commerce (both domestically and internationally).
- **Marine Debris project participants:** noted that the project had helped socialise key policy imperatives, increased awareness of the roles and

⁷The study also proposed some ideas for future programming by the AASP - i) Sharing lessons learned on support for Indigenous participation in international trade; ii) Fostering Indigenous to Indigenous partnerships; and iii) Integrating Indigenous values, principles and knowledge into other AASP projects.

functions of services involved in the clean-up of marine debris, and a better understanding of how services in cleaning up marine debris can promote investment, trade, and market creation.

- **MRA project participants:** participants identified a wide range of actions they committed to undertaking as a result of the project, including developing guidelines and operating procedures on digitising the recognition process and on certification of micro-credentials, factoring in the current trade agreement provisions in the digital professional service delivery platform development; and restructuring existing platforms to ensure they better facilitate professional mobility within economies in the region.
- **Women in STEM project participants:** derived benefits through increased skill development and career prospects; added value to host institutions through publications and other knowledge-sharing research outputs; generated future research collaboration opportunities; and eased the constraints and barriers faced by women researchers.

Feedback from interviews conducted in the margins of SOM 3 in 2024 and survey responses similarly supports the view that the contribution of AASP is of value within APEC (as provided in the text boxes above, which record the feedback received from Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, and Malaysia), in addition:

- The United States representative specifically mentioned that Australian workshops are ‘strategic and cover useful topics’ and are ‘of high quality, well-attended and has good speakers/experts’
- The OECD representative stated that ‘Australian leadership and capacity

building offerings in APEC are considered best practice.’ The same representative also noted that PNG was inspired by the messages delivered at the Australian-hosted workshops on the Services Trade Restrictiveness Index (STRI) and used it as a stepping stone to engage with the OECD, which is currently undertaking the OECD STRI process in collaboration with PNG, with an aim to identify services trade restrictions across PNG's services sectors.

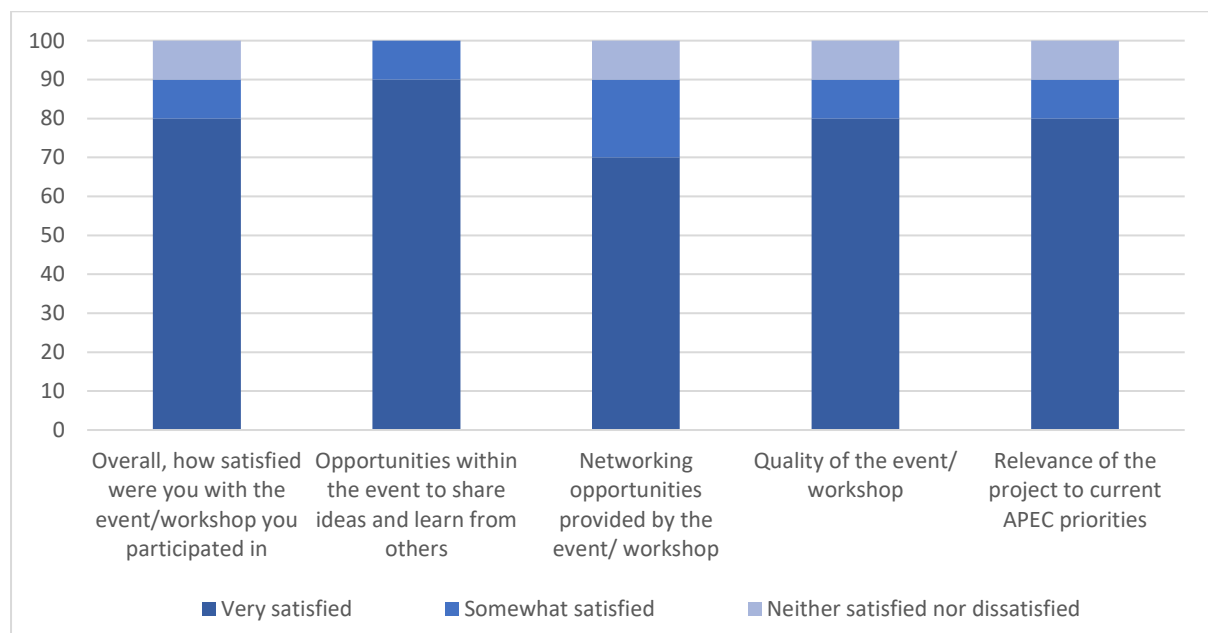
- The representative from Canada found that ‘the *Gender in Sports* workshop offered a fresh perspective on looking at sports and gender from a non-traditional lens. The speakers and experts were good and discussions were informative’.
- The representative from Chinese Taipei reported that AASP ‘workshops presented more practical issues that Chinese Taipei trade officials had not encountered before’. They also found the outputs useful and informative to guide processes domestically: ‘The workshops have inspired Chinese Taipei to find value in the services sector and start from scratch to build upon their strengths in services exports (data and statistics) starting with transportation, travel, and financial services’.
- Services Dialogues like the ones hosted by Australia within the GOS agenda provide tools and fora for collaboration, platforms for formulating and adopting some common principles (such as the *Non-Binding Guidelines on Services that Support the Clean-up of Marine Debris*), and guidelines and policy briefs which participants can use to inform domestic reform processes.

Interviews with whole-of-government partners also found that **a wide range of partners had derived direct benefits from implementing a**

self-fund project under the AASP. For instance, both Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and Food Standards Australian New Zealand (FSANZ) reported that their respective projects had helped strengthen bilateral relationships with economies within APEC, which is critical to the work they are doing domestically. DAFF notes that their project on biosecurity, for instance, ‘improves supply chain performance through implementing a capacity building plan to assist economies in overcoming specific obstacles as

outlined in the APEC Connectivity Blueprint for 2015-2025’. The Export Council of Australia reports that an unintended consequence of their work to enhance Indigenous trade through AASP has strengthened relationships domestically with Indigenous business chambers, has led to new Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with different business chambers, and created a previously unrealised export market for previously marginalised Indigenous businesses.

Figure 1: Participant satisfaction with AASP projects (Source: own survey)



End of Program Outcome 1: Regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia's broader trade and investment agenda is strengthened to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies.

Against each of the respective intermediate outcomes above, there is **clear evidence that despite the relatively short-term time period of the majority of the AASP self-funded projects, the program is making strong progress towards EoPO 1.** Examples have already been provided that demonstrate that projects promoting Australia's priorities within APEC are also helping developing economies realise their own ambitions with respect to inclusive growth. By placing emphasis on the ODA-eligible economies, the AASP is facilitating greater participation and access of these economies to participate in projects focusing on the key priorities of APEC. AASP's capacity building efforts are helping to shape and influence the development agendas of APEC economies, and projects (as evidenced in the feedback from developing economies) are enhancing the capability of these economies to deliver necessary domestic policy reforms and the implementation of good regulatory practice.

The AASP has helped to strengthen regional economic integration, including through increasing capacities in developing economies with respect to bilateral and free trade agreements (FTAs). The enhanced knowledge and capacities of regional partners (gained through AASP projects) have equipped the economies to come to the table better informed and negotiate better on the FTA terms and chapters, which has led to positive trade outcomes for all involved parties. Representatives from Peru, for instance, noted that they had drawn on knowledge gained through the AASP (specifically with respect to global supply chain issues) to inform their FTA with China.

The AASP has also promoted structural reform to maximise inclusive growth for APEC

developing economies. The representative from Malaysia explained how the AASP has influenced domestic structural reforms: 'We appreciate Australia's ongoing commitment to fostering cross-fora collaboration and knowledge-sharing in professional services across the APEC region. We look forward to further cooperation in this crucial area, which aligns closely with our domestic economic priorities and APEC's shared vision for a more integrated services sector'. The representative from Chinese Taipei had also noted how they had drawn on 'concepts and concrete examples' from AASP projects to help raise 'the importance of services in trade' when senior officials are engaged in trade negotiations.

In addition, the **AASP is having a notable impact on policy development** through the provision of critical building blocks necessary for economic and structural reform, such as through policy briefs, influencing Ministerial statements, and the development of non-binding guidelines that support Australia's broader trade and investment agenda within APEC.

End of Program Outcome 2: Australia's influence within APEC and across the region is enhanced to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies.

Australian leadership and capacity building offerings in APEC are considered best practice by key informants consulted during the fieldwork of the MTR. Australia is seen to be leading APEC's work on a number of APEC's key policy priorities, and Australia is leading on key aspects of APEC's work (e.g. services and structural reform) that benefit all APEC economies. Australia's overall reputation in driving trade and economic policy in standards-setting, services trade, and inclusive trade has been enhanced by the different projects delivered by the AASP. In addition,

Australia is considered a strong APEC capacity building and technical cooperation partner.

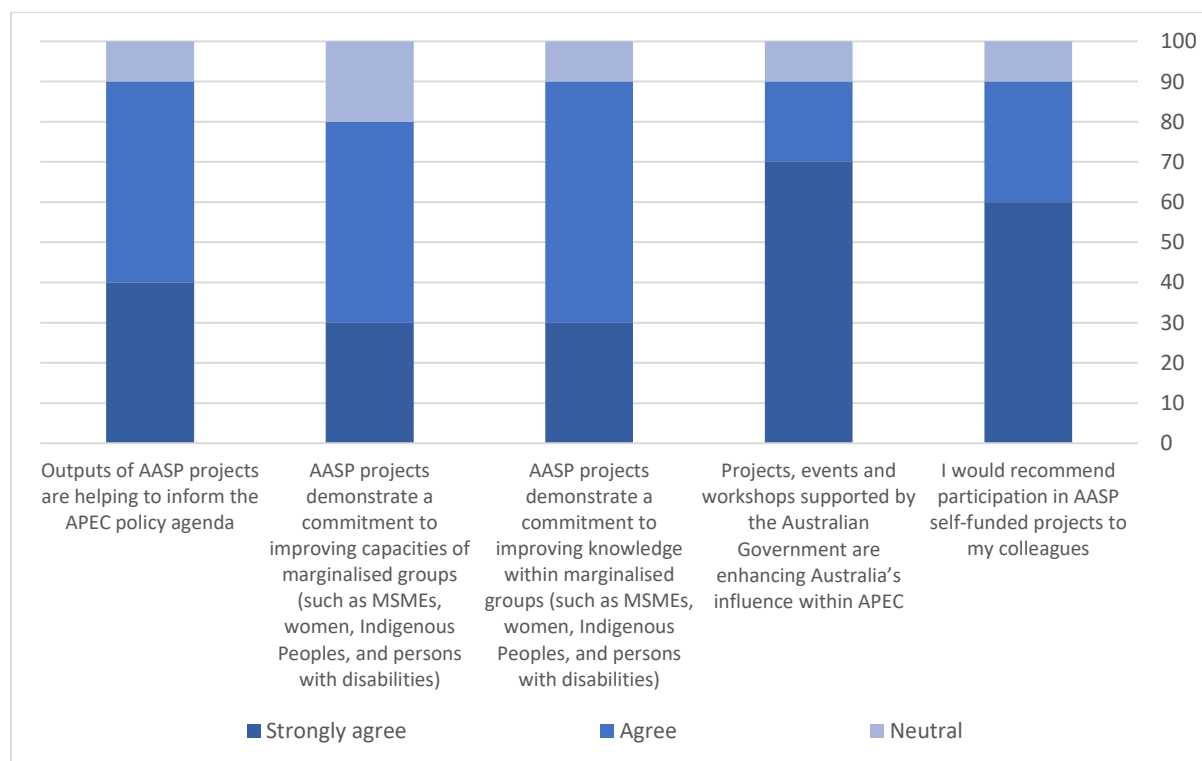
Interviews with Australia’s partners within APEC endorse the view of Australia’s contribution as valuable (as already noted under the discussion of IO 5, which notes that Australia’s influence within APEC is being enhanced through the quality and relevance of the projects it has funded). For instance, in an interview during SOM3 meetings in 2024 with a representative from the United States of America, the representative appreciated Australia's cross-fora collaboration and leadership in areas like services liberalisation and structural reform:

The USA finds Australia’s contribution to the APEC Services agenda quite critical. It plays an important role as a leader in services in the Indo-Pacific region The workshops funded by Australia are strategic and cover useful topics such as environmental services and structural reform... Australia leads by example in the area of service

liberalisation and does good cross fora collaboration. The Australian workshops/events are of high quality, well-attended and have good speakers/experts. This has helped the US to rationalise their efforts in APEC. The US appreciates Australia’s openness and collaboration during design stages. Australia improves GOS reputation as a very productive group within CTI.

Figure 2 illustrates that the vast majority (90% of respondents) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that the AASP enhances Australia’s influence within APEC to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies. Respondents also provided high approval ratings for the AASP’s outputs in helping to inform the APEC policy agenda and that self-funded projects demonstrate the AASP’s commitment to important cross-cutting priorities.

Figure 2: Survey perceptions of AASP’s impact (Source: own survey)



2.2. Efficiency

Key Findings:

The AASP is on track to expend as expected against the full investment by its conclusion in June 2026. The AASP has ensured a relatively balanced portfolio across the key priorities of the program. However, to achieve this, the program will need to be continually proactive in ensuring that the pipeline continues to maintain a balanced portfolio as it risks not having sufficient projects generated by the whole-of government partners due to increasing resourcing constraints raised by these partners. In-house, the program needs to carefully prioritise projects that address Australia's APEC priorities and intended AASP outcomes in a balanced fashion (i.e. avoid overrepresentation of some projects for one priority and neglect projects in others). The AASP has improved systems and processes internally to enhance the efficiency of the program and has enhanced its information sharing on the processes (including revised project templates, a step-by-step guide to project proposal preparation and implementation, and regular interaction with ASP agencies). The AASP provides support to the APEC Secretariat by funding the position of APEC's Project Management Unit (PMU) Director. In that role, an Australian official is seconded to oversee the implementation of APEC funds - including funds provided by Australia. PMU has implemented various approaches to improve efficiency including introducing new online tools for project management and training.

Proactive early planning of a pipeline of activities, and ramped-up communication efforts offer ample flexibility for the consideration and embrace of innovative approaches and activities (better value for ODA funds), and the AASP has implemented a number of steps to ensure the efficient delivery of projects (including leveraging hybrid and innovative ways to enhance capacity building, developing a program database of experts, and hosting events alongside face-to-face meetings of key APEC committees). When necessary AASP have been adaptive, respond to changing needs and have pivoted to address changes in context. Signing the extension of the contract with the managing contractor for another 12 months, has also ensured continuity of additional external technical assistance required to manage the program.

The AASP has an investment value of \$18,500,000 for the four-year program (June 2022 to June 2026), of which an expected \$4.6 million per year is to be committed to supporting APEC through direct support to the APEC secretariat, centrally managed funds that support capacity building, and self-funded projects. As of 6 November 2024, the AASP had committed \$12,520,692 (67% of the total investment) with approximately \$9.4m expended (50%) - a strong indication that **the**

program is on track to expend as expected against the full investment by its conclusion in June 2026⁸.

Part of Australia's financial contributions to directly support the APEC Secretariat includes funding for the position of APEC's Project Management Unit (PMU) Director through the AASP. In this role, an Australian official is seconded to oversee the implementation of APEC funds, including those provided by

⁸IMRs confirm this finding - the 2023 IMR, for instance, notes that 95% of the 2022-2023 allocation was expended by 7 June 2023.

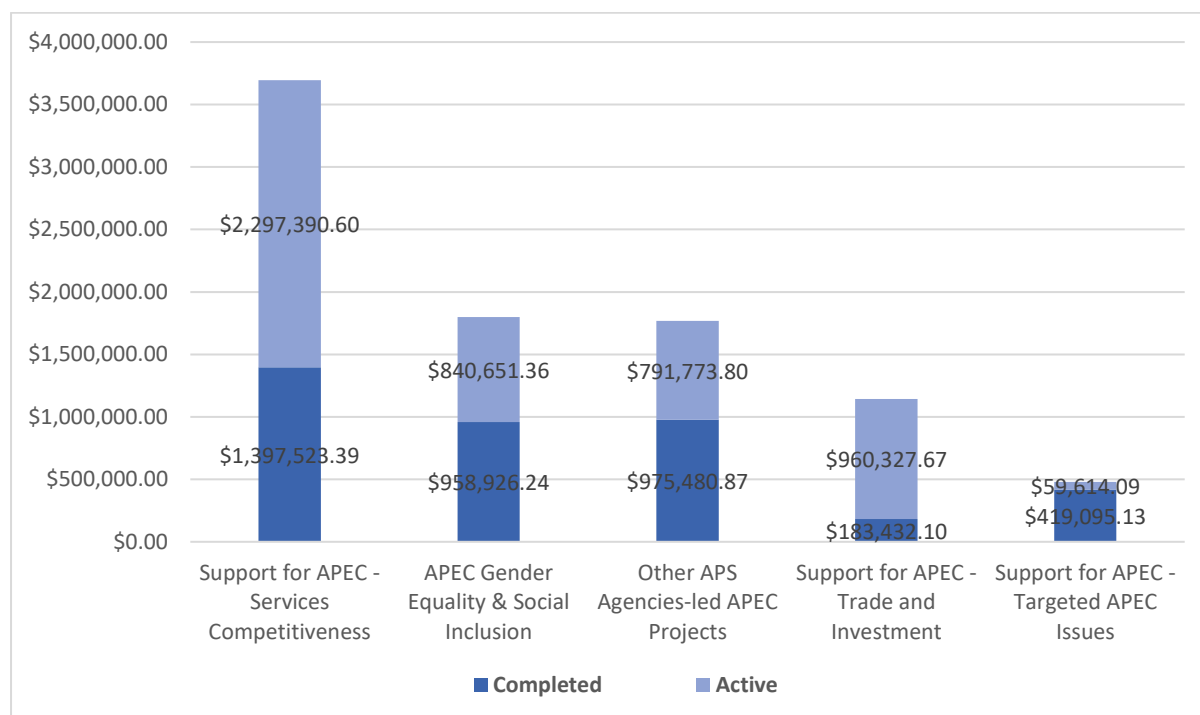
Australia. The PMU has implemented various approaches to improve efficiency, including the introduction of new online tools for project management and training.

As illustrated in Figure 3, *Support for APEC Services Competitiveness* has accounted for 42% of the committed funds, followed by *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion* (20% of committed funds) and other *APS⁹ Agencies-led APEC* projects (also 20% of the committed funds), with the remaining 18% committed to *Support for Trade and Investment* issues, and targeted APEC issues. With respect to active versus completed funds, both *Support for Trade and Investment* and *Support for APEC Services Competitiveness* have the largest proportion of active projects as a percentage of total committed funds (84% of the total committed funds to Trade and Investment is

for active projects, while for *Services Competitiveness* 62% of the total committed funds are for active projects).

In the case of *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion* (47% of total committed funds are for active projects) and *Other APS Agencies-led APEC* projects (45% of total committed funds are for active projects), the data suggest that more projects have been completed to date than are currently active. While this provides compelling evidence of the admirable work to date to address important cross-cutting policy priorities and to ensure strong representativity of Australian Public Service (APS) agencies within APEC forums, it does also signal that the **AASP will need to maintain a strong, vibrant pipeline to ensure momentum is maintained across APS agencies.**

Figure 3: AASP's committed funds (completed vs active projects), per category, 2022 to September 2024 (Source: AASP Budget Tracker)



⁹ Subject to timely extension to the current contract with Strategic which ends on 31 August 2024.

A rigorous quality assurance system to review project proposals under the AASP, including ensuring a robust M&E plan, is incorporated at the design stage of projects, has ensured the design of projects that have been proven to be both effective and efficient.

The AASP has also improved systems and processes internally to enhance the efficiency of the program. DFAT's APEC and Latin America branch (ALM) governs the operations of the AASP, supported by a managing contractor to provide design, M&E and research support services for the AASP. This enables the use of complementary support from in-DFAT resources, and single-point accountability facilitates greater coordination of the program. AASP Investment Manager in ALM monitors the contractor's performance and monitors the deliverables and milestones, including holding fortnightly discussions with the contractor on M&E, and continuous improvement.

The APEC PMU has also implemented various approaches to improve efficiency in the management of APEC funds, including introducing new online tools and staff to undertake quality assessments to speed up the review process.

After a review of the contracting model, the **AASP is underpinned by a contracting model that utilises a competitive market approach** and has helped diversify implementing partners/service providers to ensure value for money. In line with recently introduced standard operating procedures (SOP) for ODA payments, the program has introduced further due diligence measures to strengthen the integrity of AASP funds and follow Commonwealth Procurement Rules and DFAT procurement policy.

Over time, **through enhancing information sharing on the processes (including revised project templates, a step-by-step guide to project proposal preparation and implementation, and regular interaction with**

APS agencies), the AASP has developed a harmonised approach to programming. The AASP has also enhanced information sharing among the network of agencies involved in APEC, including through the provision of regular updates at the APEC Inter-Departmental Committees (IDCs) (including sharing information on the availability of AASP funds) and sharing successes and lessons from ongoing or recently implemented projects. Information sharing and coordination to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Australia's work with APEC, particularly by sharing lessons learned about effective (and ineffective) approaches to engaging within the APEC ecosystem through an active approach to communication, includes a quarterly newsletter to profile different projects, and encouraging whole-of-government partners to use social media to communicate project successes.

Innovative approaches and activities

introduced by whole-of-government partners have also helped enhance efficiency. By bringing in whole-of-government partners who provide co-funding and/or in-kind support, the AASP is able to leverage resources to enhance the efficient delivery of projects. Experimentation with hybrid capacity building models (combining online and in-person delivery) and new communication methods (such as video content) represent an opportunity to trial new approaches for greater efficiency and effectiveness.

The AASP has also, **where feasible and practicable, built on existing projects, including through multi-year or multi-phase activities at the outset.** Multi-year funding (such as in the case of the work on services and structural reform and on MRAs) has been shown to ensure better outcomes and more efficient delivery as projects can leverage and build on earlier successes. Implementing partners raised that funding uncertainty between phases can hinder long-term planning, and there is a sense that momentum is lost while

decisions are being taken regarding whether or not to extend a project for another phase. Nevertheless, there is also value in the iterative/phased approach, as, for example, the GRIT project has noticeably changed across the three phases in how it has targeted participants (this would likely not have been planned for at the outset of a multi-year project).

Other **efficient practices introduced by the AASP** include developing a program database of experts, which, coupled with leveraging the expertise of collaborators, ensures an efficient means to identify speakers for events in a timely manner. Most projects have recorded presentations to enable online access, in addition to uploading project outputs, which ensure, for instance, that publications and policy briefs become a sustainable resource well after the funding has ended. Hosting projects alongside face-to-face meetings of key APEC committees enables efficient use of the time of representatives from different economies, and it also facilitates information being shared within relevant committees by representatives who have participated in events arranged by the different AASP projects.

AASP projects have demonstrated their ability to adapt and respond to changing needs and pivot to changes in context. This demonstrates the ability of the AASP project management team to facilitate these pivots. Below are some examples.

- The *APEC Group on Services Project – Services that Clean-up Marine Debris*, for

instance, evolved and shifted the focus over time as the work progressed in response to feedback from research and discussion in GoS. It adapted to respond to technical outputs. The timing of the project was also extended to allow for the negotiation of non-binding guidelines (an output that was not initially envisaged at the start of the project).

- The different phases of *Growing Indigenous Business through Trade (GRIT)* projects were adapted based on lessons learnt from earlier phases. GRIT phases have adapted from focusing on export-ready businesses willing to export internationally to focus on businesses that are at the start of their export journey. In the current and third phases of the project, GRIT is focusing on providing regional support to deliver practical advice in a local language to maximise the benefits for participants. The workshops and training sessions will be delivered in the native language of the participants - Spanish in the South American region (Peru, Chile, Mexico), Tagalog in the Philippines, and Tok Pisin in PNG. Not only is this likely to enhance learning, but it will also provide practical benefits to the participants regarding building business connections and networking.
- The *Mutual Recognition Agreement* project reshaped its approach to the Community of Practice (CoP), which included rethinking who would be invited, to enhance both the breadth and depth of discussion within the CoP.

2.3.Risks and Safeguards

Key Findings:

The AASP is a low-risk program. The Investment Manager, in collaboration with the Managing Contractor (MC), performs routine assessments of the risk register, conducts risk assessments for each proposed project, and considers risk and safeguards as part of the project proposal assessment stages. The DFAT Investment Manager led the drafting of the due diligence assessment of the APEC Secretariat in 2024. The due diligence exercise provided an opportunity to review and evaluate the risks associated with providing funds to the APEC Secretariat as Australia's funding partner and ensure DFAT has appropriate mitigation measures in place.

Additionally, the AASP-funded position of an Australian officer as APEC's PMU Director oversees the implementation of APEC Sub-Funds, including contributions to these Sub-Funds made by Australia. The PMU Director has adopted various strategies to manage risk, such as online training for officials from APEC economies and supervising staff to conduct thorough quality assessments of project proposals. While the MTR process did not identify any major risks that can have a direct impact on the program, below are some risks worth monitoring for the remainder of the program:

- The pipeline each year needs to be carefully managed to ensure it is fully programmed early on during the financial year (preferably no later than March of each financial year). Increasingly, the pressure is growing on DFAT to design and implement more and more projects to populate the pipeline. However, it was evident from the MTR consultations that not all whole-of-government partners are suitably structured or resourced to undertake AASP projects that include undertaking onerous procurement activities relating to implementation.
- Lack of resources within DFAT and staff turnover could have a negative impact on project progress. Where practicable, DFAT must ensure staff continuity and appropriate handover to avoid unnecessary delays in finalising projects to populate and manage the pipeline.
- All project overseers must continue to produce completion reports in a prompt manner after their project has ended. This would ensure DFAT is sufficiently capturing and reporting the project's achievements, successes and evidence/data on gender, disability, and other social inclusion markers. This evidence/data is critical to ensuring the program's achievements can be communicated more broadly to Ministers, APEC stakeholders, and the Australian public.

The AASP is a low-risk program. It primarily involves small, short-term capacity building activities implemented or overseen by trusted whole-of-government partners. Workshops, meetings, reports and consultancies – none of which carry an especially high element of risk – are standard outputs under the AASP. The AASP maintains this profile through an ongoing assessment of its risk register, risk assessments for each proposed project, and

through the consideration of risk and safeguards as a standing agenda item for the Project Assessment Committee.

Through the rigorous design of projects, the AASP has a process to ensure safeguard and due diligence requirements are met. For example, fraud risk is considered for each AASP activity proposal and regularly reviewed as part of ongoing risk management. ALM staff

with project management responsibilities have oversight of fraud risk and ensure contracted parties adhere to DFAT's mandatory fraud clause. Similarly, contractors are required to act in accordance with DFAT's Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) policy. The new standard operating procedures (SOP) for ODA payments also place new due diligence requirements on the contractor as well as DFAT officers during invoicing to reduce incidences of fraud.

The AASP-funded position of APEC's PMU Director oversees the implementation of APEC Sub-Funds - including contributions to those Sub-Funds provided by Australia. The PMU Director has implemented various approaches to manage risk, including online training for officials from APEC economies and supervising staff to undertake rigorous quality assessments of project proposals.

While **no new risks emerged during the MTR consultations**, which would have a direct impact on the program, it is worth noting that the pipeline each year needs to be carefully managed to ensure it is full early on during the financial year. Increasingly, the pressure is growing on DFAT to design and implement more and more projects to populate the

pipeline as not all whole-of-government partners are suitably structured or resourced to ensure appropriate administration of AASP projects and are not willing to undertake onerous procurement activities relating to project implementation. This is despite the fact that partners were quick to recognise the value and benefit their agency has derived from implementing the project. In a few instances, certain partners have found the workload greater than initially envisaged, exacerbated by internal restructuring, which has meant that it was difficult for the project to meet its expected milestones in the time that was initially envisaged. Staff turnover within implementing APS agencies can also impact implementation schedules and lead to delays if there is an inadequate internal handover process.

The AASP will need to continue to monitor this risk to the pipeline and, where practicable, ensure appropriate handover processes are in place to prevent projects from being delayed unnecessarily by staff turnover. The new design for the successor phase should be commenced in early 2025 and should be a key consideration for the management moving forward to avoid the risk of disruption of momentum between the two phases.



Photo by [Naja Bertolt Jensen](#)

2.4. Lessons Learnt

Drawing on the case studies (in addition to reviewing project completion reports and informed by interviews with participants), several lessons have been identified, serving a dual purpose - illustrating what works (or doesn't work) and informing the design of future projects under the AASP:

1. **Responsiveness:** As already noted, flexibility and responsiveness to adapt projects in response to changing contexts have secured better outcomes.
2. **Relationships:** Relationship building and the creation of networks have enhanced the impact of small-scale projects.
 - Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning have proved invaluable for participants.
3. **Quality of presenters:** The often highly technical nature of topics addressed in projects has been made understandable through highly qualified and competent subject matter experts and/or speakers, often using real-life examples to enhance participants' understanding.
4. **Participants:**
 - Ensuring the 'right' people attend events is critical for the realisation of the outcomes of projects (i.e. ensuring that the topic being addressed is of direct relevance to those attending and that those attending can utilise and apply the knowledge gleaned from the project in a policy sense). Feedback from participants suggests that when relevant discussions and conversations need to incorporate views from government officials from a wide range of ministries, it is helpful to have those ministries represented in the room. For instance, in order to develop policies and approaches to integrate women into economies more practically, it is necessary to invite speakers from Ministries of Labour or from Economic Ministries to discuss how they can advance this agenda pragmatically.
5. **Modality of instruction:** In-person events have a greater impact on participant learning, notwithstanding that hybrid events (incorporating online participation) ensure greater access.
 - Interactive group work/case studies enhance the experience of participants and secure better learning.
 - Sharing of key documents outlining the intent of the training/workshops and other materials prior to events has been found to ensure participants are often in a better position to participate in the discussion and, if applicable, aids in decision-making.
6. **Monitoring and evaluation:** When projects have been designed without appropriate reference to the AASP's Theory of Change (ToC), this has made it difficult to monitor progress against the objectives and outcomes of the AASP. It is vital to maintain the line of sight between the high-level objectives and outputs of the AASP (as outlined in the ToC) and individual projects' intended objectives. This also ensures better capturing of any risks and related mitigation.
 - Online use of survey platforms (such as Mentimeter) has ensured significantly higher response rates

and ensures responses are collected in real time to enable participant feedback.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

The overall conclusion of the MTR is that the AASP is making strong progress towards its expected outcomes and that the management and implementation of the projects the AASP supports have been largely effective and efficient. The AASP has supported a growing body of work to help progress regional economic integration and structural reform that is consistent with Australia's broader trade and investment agenda to maximise inclusive growth for APEC developing economies. The AASP has contributed to enhancing Australia's influence within APEC and across the region to support open and free rules-based trading systems that bring mutual benefit to participating economies.

Australia has played a pivotal role in working constructively with APEC economies to support increasing prioritisation of gender equality in APEC, expanding APEC's work program on Indigenous trade and investment, and promoting discussion of disability equity.

Factors for the ongoing success of the AASP include the efficacy of the program management team (aided by the robust systems in place to ensure the rigorous design of each project), the use of highly competent implementing partners, and the fact that projects are responding to the specific needs of developing economies within APEC. Feedback from participants and partners was

positive on the utility of the outputs of the AASP, the manner in which projects are delivered, and the quality of subject experts used in projects. Representatives from different economies provided a range of different examples of how the different projects have contributed to improved capacity. Key informants also acknowledged the importance that the program has placed on both gender equality and social inclusion.

While the program has achieved its intermediate outcomes thus far, it has not been without a few challenges that require monitoring throughout the remaining implementation period. This includes the finding that not all whole-of-government partners are structured or resourced adequately to undertake AASP projects, which involve burdensome procurement activities related to implementation. Additionally, staff turnover within APS agencies can impact the momentum of projects.

The program is seen to be efficient, expenditure is on track, and the program has continuously incorporated measures to enhance the efficient delivery of projects. The AASP has ensured a relatively balanced portfolio across the key priorities of the program. The program will need to be continually proactive in ensuring that the pipeline continues to maintain a balanced portfolio of projects to amplify the benefits and impact.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this review, the recommendations for the

remaining period of the program are as follows:

Recommendation	Rationale
Strategic Level	
<p>1. The design for the successor phase of AASP should be commenced in early 2025</p>	<p>This is an important step to ensure that AASP continues to maintain the momentum it has generated to date. Management should consider this a key consideration moving forward to avoid the risk of disruption of momentum between the two phases.</p>
<p>2. Multi-year funding options need to be considered in the next iteration of the program, within the overall investment timeframe and budget envelope</p>	<p>This requires sensible allocation of finite funds for the capacity building work to a small number of Australia’s APEC priorities to avoid risking fragmentation of efforts to multiple small one-off events. This would involve continuing to provide finance to Sub-Funds (such as the Women and the Economy; EAASR and its successor) managed by the APEC Secretariat and supporting PMU to administer those funds. For the design of the next phase, to consider funding a few large multi-year projects, rather than multiple small-value, one-off projects, which are often low-impact and cannot be sustained. For example, the AASP currently has 20 individual active agreements, most of which involve one-off small outputs that require complex procurement processes, which APS agencies find challenging.</p>
<p>3. In the design of the next phase, thought should be given to how to involve new partners and stakeholders with ‘capacity, expertise and interest’, to avoid reliance on existing whole-of-government partners</p>	<p>It might be desirable to establish a small grant program (noting that it would need to be carefully designed so as not to overburden the AASP’s very small program management team) for stakeholders from industry, private sector, and academia who would be keen to access DFAT funds and are better resourced and equipped to implement an initiative in line with their expertise. Noting the recent reduced interest from current whole-of-government partners on leading projects in APEC due to resource constraints, this might be a fresh way of choosing the right delivery partners. This also fits in neatly with DFAT’s ongoing attempt to have an increased online presence, be more transparent, and have a robust communication strategy for APEC.</p>

<p>4. Support the creation of Community of Practices, where practical, for individual projects</p>	<p>The AASP's projects have engaged with more than 4,000 participants, the vast majority of whom have been highly enthusiastic about the experience, have appreciated the value of the events, and have often drawn on the outputs of projects to influence change within their own economies. Consideration should be given as how to leverage this informal network of participants in a more coherent and coordinated fashion, noting that several projects are already doing this, and could provide guidance (including lessons learnt) to inform the design of projects in the future, and should be a considered as part of the design and planning for the successor phase of the AASP.</p>
<p>Operational Level</p>	
<p>5. DFAT to continue support through the AASP of APEC's Project Management Unit (PMU) and the Policy Support Unit (PSU)</p>	<p>Supporting a DFAT officer in the Secretariat who oversees all projects managed by the APEC Secretariat enhances effectiveness and reduces risk. The PMU has implemented various approaches to improve efficiency, including the introduction of new online tools for project management and training.</p>
<p>6. AASP must continue to proactively manage its pipeline, including:</p>	<p>a) Designing and implementing projects that promote disability equity and inclusion in trade, which involves collaborating with people with disabilities and/or organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) during the planning and execution phases. Conducting in-house scoping of such a project with the support of the managing contractor would provide a useful starting point.</p> <p>b) Encouraging project overseers to design innovative approaches to project delivery that move beyond simply conducting a workshop and preparing a report. Such outputs could include video content, interactive databases and web resources, communities of practice and more. In designing new activities, project overseers can draw on a growing portfolio of projects that have already been delivered by AASP, which incorporate creative and imaginative ways to transfer knowledge and build capacity.</p> <p>c) Finalising and implementing a coordinated Communication Plan for the AASP. Such a plan should also include additional resourcing to share social media content generated by individual projects to continue to increase the</p>

	awareness of the AASP, highlight successes, and share lessons
7. Project Overseers must ensure outputs are publicly available, including ensuring that:	<p>a) All AASP Projects routinely upload outputs onto accessible/online repositories. Several economies requested summaries, handouts, or policy briefs immediately after workshops to share with domestic stakeholders.</p> <p>b) All AASP projects finalise and upload completion reports to APEC’s project database to report back on how the project achieved its intended objectives, what the learnings and lessons were, and to raise AASP’s profile as an organisation implementing effective capacity building projects.</p>
8. Continue to build a portfolio of Case Studies highlighting successful projects	In order to convey a powerful narrative about the effectiveness of the AASP and to strengthen the argument for the next phase of the investment.



Annex 1 – Evaluation Questions

Australia’s APEC Support Program (AASP)

Mid-Term Review (MTR) Interview Questions

Designed for interviewees who will be participating (or have participated) in Australian self-funded hosted events/workshops.

Contribution of AASP as being valuable

1. Please provide your name, your agency/economy, and your role?
2. Have you previously attended an AUS workshop in 2022, 2023 or 2024?
 - i. If so, how many/what?
 - ii. Could you explain how the project/workshop is or was relevant to the needs of your economy?
3. What was the highlight of the project/workshop? What most did you get out of it?
4. To what extent do you think projects/workshops supported by the Australian Government are enhancing Australia’s influence or its perception as a partner within APEC?
5. How can Australia improve its projects/workshops in the future? Do you have any specific feedback?

Progressing implementation of an open and rules-based trade and investment environment by 2026

6. To what extent did the project/workshop generate ideas or inform new approaches within your economy to effectively progress an open and rules-based trade and investment environment?
7. To what extent were ideas generated that have assisted with:
 - i. negotiation and implementation of trade, investment, and economic agreements,
 - ii. formulation and implementation of trade and economic policies and strategies,
 - iii. legislation and regulatory reform to improve transparency or predictability in trade policy/frameworks/enabling environment.

Progressing implementation of measures to promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms by 2026

8. To what extent did the project/workshop generate ideas or new approaches within your economy to effectively promote regional integration and domestic structural reforms?
9. To what extent were ideas generated that have assisted with:
 - i. cooperation with other economies (APEC or other) in trade, investment and domestic regulation
 - ii. implementation of structural reforms that are inclusive and where environmental, social and governance risks are managed.

Progressing implementation of efforts within APEC to promote international standards, norms and rules on digital trade by 2026

10. To what extent have Australia's workshops helped your economy with ideas and approaches to shape an international environment (within APEC or outside) that enables digital trade and reinforces the rules-based trading system, especially digital trade rules?
11. How did our workshop succeed in advocating for liberalisation and facilitation of digital trade?
12. How did our workshop encourage domestic discussion and reforms in the areas of privacy, consumer and data protection?

Gender equality and disability inclusion are integrated in AASP plans, projects, monitoring & evaluation, and analysis

13. To what extent have Australia's projects/workshops led to improved capacities or knowledge that are resulting in trade outcomes for marginalised groups, i.e., MSMEs, women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and those in rural/remote areas? Could you provide an example?
14. What reforms or policy changes were you able to promote or instigate within your economy with the acquired knowledge?
15. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Annex 2 – Stakeholder Consultations

List of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) undertaken

Name	Organisation	Remote / in person
[REDACTED]	Section Chief, Multilateral Trade Affairs Division International Trade Administration, MOEA, Chinese Taipei	In- person
[REDACTED]	Food Standards Australia New Zealand	In- person
[REDACTED]	DAFF	In- person
[REDACTED]	Department of General Economic Issues and Integration Studies, Viet Nam	In - person
[REDACTED]	OECD	In-person
[REDACTED]	Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU, Australia	In - person
[REDACTED]	DFAT	Remote
[REDACTED]	DAFF	In - person
[REDACTED]	DAFF	In - person
[REDACTED]	Ministry of Finance and Economy, Brunei	In- person
[REDACTED]	Food Standards Australia New Zealand	In- person
[REDACTED]	DFAT	In - person
[REDACTED]	Coordinator and Negotiator for Customs and Trade Facilitation at the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism	In-person
[REDACTED]	Committee on Trade and Investment (CTI) Representative, Indonesia	In - person
[REDACTED]	DAFF	In – person
[REDACTED]	Senior Executive, APMEN Operational Center, Shanghai e-Port, People’s Republic of China	In-person
[REDACTED]	Export Council of Australia New Zealand	Remote
[REDACTED]	Department of Education, Australia	Remote
[REDACTED]	DFAT	Remote
[REDACTED]	Ministry of Trade and Industry, Malaysia	In- person
[REDACTED]	Deputy Director General, APEC National Secretariat, Office of the Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and International Economic Relations, DFA, the Philippines	In - person
[REDACTED]	Gender Expert, Mexico	Remote
[REDACTED]	Trade Officer, Hong Kong Ministry of Foreign Affairs	In-person
[REDACTED]	United States Trade Representative, USA	In- person
[REDACTED]	Secretary General of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC)	In - person
[REDACTED]	Director, Investment Servicing & Promotion Division, IPA, PNG	
[REDACTED]	Global Affairs Canada, Canada	In- person
[REDACTED]	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Australia	Remote
[REDACTED]	DFAT	In - person
[REDACTED]	PPWE Chair, First Assistant Secretary and Principal Gender Specialist, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Remote
[REDACTED]	Section Chief from Department of Gender Equality, Chinese Taipei	
[REDACTED]	Food Standards Australia New Zealand	In- person
[REDACTED]	DFAT	Remote
[REDACTED]	RMIT, Australia	Remote
[REDACTED]	Export Council of Australia	Remote

Annex 3 – List of Documents

Type	Document Name
DFAT	
	Strategic Design Framework: Australia’s APEC Support Program (May, 2022)
AASP Investment Monitoring Reports	
	Annual Investment Performance Report 2022
	Annual Investment Monitoring Report 2023
	Annual Investment Monitoring Report 2024
Completion Reports	
	Addressing Skill Needs through Online Micro-Credentials in Higher Education (July, 2024)
	APEC-Australia Women in Research Fellowship Project Phase 2 (September 2024)
	APEC FinTech Study (February, 2023)
	APEC Group on Services Project – Services that clean-up Marine Debris (June, 2023)
	APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Agreement Project (Multi-Year) (January, 2024)
	APEC – Services that Support the Movement of Essential Goods (November, 2022)
	Fostering Greater SME Participation in Global Value Chains Phase Two – Digitalisation and Utilisation of Emerging Technologies (April, 2024)
	Growing Indigenous Businesses Through Trade – Phase II (GRIT) (February, 2023)
	Implementing Circular Economy Standards in the APEC Region (March, 2024)
	Indigenous Trade Workshop: Increasing Access to the Benefits of Trade for Indigenous Businesses and Entrepreneurs (January, 2024)
	Joint Economic Committee and Group on Services Symposium on Services and Structural Reform (October, 2023)
	Services that Support the Movement of Essential Goods (November, 2023)
	Sub-regional Pilot of the APEC Occupational Standards for the Travel, Tourism and Hospitality Industry in the Pacific Alliance, 2019 – 2023 (July, 2024)
	Supporting AI at scale in the APEC region through international standards (March, 2024)
	Trade Policy Dialogue to facilitate development of common APEC understanding of what can be considered an environmental good (February, 2023)
Reviews/ Designs	
	AASP Half Yearly Monitoring Report (October, 2023)
	AASP Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Analysis (September, 2023)
	AASP – Light Touch Review of the APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Agreement Projects (2020 – 2022) (April 2023)
	APEC Indigenous Trade Scoping Study (January, 2024)
	Joint EC-GOS Project: Services and Structural Reform Agenda (October 2023)
Select Activity Outputs	

	APEC Committee on Trade and Investment Workshop Summary Report: Increasing Access to the Benefits of Trade for Indigenous Businesses and Entrepreneurs 2023 (September 2024)
	APEC Policy Brief on EAASR and ASCR Services Competitiveness and Structural Reform (August, 2023)
	Impact of digitalisation on digital trade: Evidence from APEC economies Infographic (August, 2024)
	PNG Investment Treaty Handbook (May, 2024)
	Report on Care Compact Dialogue Discussions APEC PPWE II Seattle 16 August 2023 (November, 2023)
	Understanding the economic impact of digitalisation on digital trade: Evidence from APEC economies (September, 2024)
	Workshop Report: Facilitating the Implementation of the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework and its Associated Guidelines (the Framework) by APEC Economies (September, 2024)

Annex 4 – Case Studies

Refer to separate documents.

Annex 5 – MTR Scope of Work

MID-TERM REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA’S APEC SUPPORT PROGRAM (AASP)

Purpose

The Strategic Design Framework for Australia’s APEC Support Program (AASP) requires a Mid-Term Review (MTR) to be conducted in the program’s third year, i.e., in Financial Year 2024-2025. The Design Framework and DFAT’s [Development evaluation policy](#) requires that DFAT must undertake robust monitoring and evaluation at the investment level in order to articulate a credible narrative of what is being achieved through Australia’s support to APEC through the AASP.

The purpose of the MTR is to assess the program’s progress towards the Intermediate and End of Program Outcomes. The review will also assess performance, inform learning, and identify operational and thematic areas for further consideration and/or adaptation of the existing program. Importantly, the findings from the MTR would provide input to the 2025 Investment Monitoring Report process (IMR) and the Tier 2 reporting process.

Background

DFAT’s [International Development Programming Guide’s Chapter 6](#) – ‘Implementation: investment management, evaluation, and quality and results reporting’ notes that for DFAT-led investments, within 12 months of mobilisation, there must be a credible baseline and the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system must be operational. AASP already has such a MEL system in place. It mentions that monitoring arrangements must be planned, continuous, systematic, and documented in a monitoring and evaluation framework (MELF).

DFAT has [Design and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Standards](#) that apply across all stages of the ODA program cycle (planning, design, implementation and review/evaluation). The standards have a specific section on ‘planning for monitoring’, which provides guidance and tools on how to develop and conduct a monitoring visit/program. The proposed Mid Term Review (MTR) takes into account such guidance.

DFAT’s [Performance Delivery Framework](#) specifies that Program areas are required to identify, prioritise and complete a minimum number of evaluations each year based on program size. The AASP Design document clearly notes that the contributions to the two End of Program Outcomes will be assessed during a Lessons Learned Review of the program, to be held in the program’s third year (i.e. July 2024 onwards). The MTR will assess progress in achieving outcomes and lessons learned and will help inform decision making regarding future programming for the investment. An End of Program Independent Evaluation will also be conducted to verify outcomes and inform DFAT of potential future directions and learning. The decision on the End of Program Evaluation will be subject to further discussions in FY 2025-2026. This MTR proposal focuses on the ‘Lessons Learned Review’ part, which will be in the form of a ‘Mid-Term Review’.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework (MELF) for AASP

The MELF for AASP was prepared during the Design stage, and it guides the whole-of-program approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning. A key feature of the MELF is the approach that will be taken by the program to collect data, including the different types of tools required to ensure reliable and valid data. The MELF specifies who will assess what and when, to learn from and share information on the program’s direct achievements and contributions to development results.

The MELF includes a Performance Assessment Framework (PAF), which sets out the intended performance of AASP and the indicators against which AASP will be measured. The MTR would fulfil

the PAF requirements (see Annex 1). M&E data and information gathered through this MTR will help inform decision-making about the quality and effectiveness of activities of AASP and, most importantly, provide input for DFAT’s mandatory internal processes of performance reporting, including:

- the annual [Investment Monitoring Report](#) process (IMR) for 2025, and
- [tier 2](#) reporting for 2025 – that includes results that track Australia’s contribution to development against Australia’s [International Development Policy](#).

The proposed MTR will be low-key but ‘fit for purpose’ and ‘proportional’ to our requirements. This is because AASP is not a traditional aid program. APEC is a grouping of countries that engage in dialogue to promote economic growth outcomes in the region, and accordingly, the focus of this investment is to build capacity of APEC officials and other stakeholders instead of providing direct aid for development projects.

Key Review Questions

The questions the MTR will address are set out under **Annex 1** of this Report.

The detailed questions for informants and interviewees would be discussed and finalised during the inception meeting scheduled to take place in June 2024.

Approach

A multi-methods approach will be used to gather evidence, including a short survey sent to a sample of activity participants, and key interviews with select informants. Key informants will include DFAT’s APEC and Latin America Branch, selected APEC officials familiar with AASP projects, project overseers, and a small sample of activity participants.

The MTR will be undertaken from June to September 2024¹⁰.

The MTR team will consist of AASP Advisory Support team (Strategic) Evaluation specialists (Matt Smith and Alex Gruenewald) and DFAT’s Kanu Negi (AASP Investment Manager).

The mid-term review will be done in two phases:

Phase 1 will focus on interviews with selected activity participants from APEC economies and gathering a wide breadth of responses from across the AASP portfolio. This phase will involve the review team members, conducting a series of ‘in-person’ and/or ‘virtual’ interviews with project overseers of AASP projects, selected activity participants, and selected APEC economy officials. The intent would be to seek answers to the evaluation questions and, in particular, gather views, perceptions and evidence of policy or regulatory reform that AASP projects may have generated within the economies.

Phase 2 will focus on producing 3-4 case studies and a succinct ‘Mid-term lessons learnt review’ report. Each case study will be a deep dive to illustrate progress and evidence of achievement and identify key lessons learnt from priority themes. The deep dive case studies could include, but are not limited to:

- i. An example of the AASP promoting service competitiveness and mobility e.g. *Mutual Recognition Project*
- ii. An example of AASP promoting environment-related services, e.g. *Services that Support the Clean-up of Marine Debris/Ocean Pollution project*

¹⁰ Subject to timely extension to the current contract with Strategic which ends on 31 August 2024.

- iii. An example of AASP promoting gender equality, e.g. *Women in STEM and Research* (multi-year) and
- iv. An example of AASP promoting Indigenous inclusion e.g. *Growing Indigenous Business through Trade (GRIT phases 1 & 2)*.

The MTR report will summarise review findings from both phases, including evidence or progress and performance based on interviewee responses, recommendations or learnings for improvement and highlighting thematic areas where the program can be adjusted/improved based on feedback.

Sequencing and Review Team Responsibilities

The following table presents indicative sequencing and allocation of the AASP Advisory Support team’s responsibilities.

Task	Indicative timing
Inception meeting with DFAT	June
Document review and analysis	June
Survey design	July
Survey data compilation and analysis	August
APEC official consultations (during SOM3)	August
Government of Australia consultations (Canberra),	August/September
Project consultations	August/September
Report writing	September
Report finalisation	September

Funding and Resourcing

DFAT’s existing services order with the AASP Advisory Support team - *Activity 22A482 -Support for APEC - Program Management* - includes dedicated MEL personnel and sufficient budget under the reimbursable costs (professional fees and advisor support costs categories) to conduct this MTR. Some reallocation from personnel fees to Advisor Support costs may be required, without any changes to the overall Agreement value, in consultation with the AASP Investment Manager. No new or additional financial resources will be required as costs for this monitoring and evaluation work have already been incorporated into the activity budget.

Travel for Strategic Personnel

We expect up to two AASP Advisory Support team staff to attend Canberra-based evaluation consultations. This is anticipated to be Matt Smith and, if required, another evaluation expert (Alex Gruenewald). The cost of international flights from Matt Smith’s home base in the UK will be covered by Strategic, not DFAT. Other costs for the Canberra-based consultations will be covered under the reimbursable costs (professional fees and advisor support costs categories).

Travel for AASP Investment Manager (DFAT)

Travel for DFAT AASP Investment Manager for monitoring and evaluation activities has been allocated in the AASP budget under the relevant Activity dedicated to the monitoring, review and evaluation of the AASP when it was designed. Appropriate S23 delegate (SES) approval will be sought to use the officer’s use of ODA funding for international travel as per ODA requirements¹¹. Since this travel directly relates to the management of an ODA investment (including design, implementation, and review), then the costs associated with it are ODA-eligible.

¹¹ DFAT assesses Project level monitoring and evaluation is specific to the direct aid deliverable and is ODA eligible.

As the DFAT AASP Investment Manager, it is proposed that Ms Negi will travel to Peru for 4-5 days (subject to timing of the workshops) during the SOM3 cluster of meetings to be held in Lima in order to take advantage of the fact that activity participants who will be on the ground during this cluster to attend APEC meetings and workshops to facilitate face to face interviews. Ms Negi will schedule appropriate interview times ahead of the workshops to ensure full participation and ask evaluation questions as per the evaluation plan specifically to assess ‘to what extent the DFAT self-funded activities have led or contributed to changes or reforms in their respective economies’.

Most attendees are likely to be the ones who have attended previous workshops hosted by Australia since some AASP projects are multiyear projects. Ms Negi will conduct in-person interviews with up to 9. Covering each ODA-eligible APEC economy key informants during the workshops below. The convergence of such workshops below funded by AASP presents a unique opportunity to conduct this MTR.

Date (Tentative)	Timing	Event
GOS-related events at SOM3		
15 August	Full day	GOS Workshop on ‘Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS), Digital Services and Barriers faced by Women in International Trade in Services’
16 August	Full day	GOS Workshop on ‘Applying Effective Principles for Technical Standards Development in Services’
17 August	Full day	GOS Plenary + Technical Group Meeting
18-20 August *It may be shortened to two days.	TBD	ASCR Dialogue, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation of women in high-skilled services trade in APEC • Joint EC and GOS event on Services and Structural Reform
Trade and Investment related events in SOM3		
Date TBD	Full day?	A path to Paperless Trade workshop