Since the founding of the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) in 1994, public service has become more challenging. We have shifted from the 1994 theme ‘Government in transition’ to the 2014 theme ‘Public service transformation’ – the more casual ‘transition’ has become the more comprehensive ‘transformation’.

The CAPAM 2014 Biennial Conference was reflective of the organisation’s experience. For two decades CAPAM has been the organisation for co-operation, dialogue and exchange concerning good public sector administration and management. As founding chair Sir Kenneth Stowe once noted: ‘The essence of CAPAM is to enable Commonwealth governments to perform better by fostering an environment of shared experience and collaboration.’

A speaker at the most recent biennial conference likened public service in 2014 to ‘the Red Queen’s race’ in Lewis Carroll’s book, Through the Looking Glass. In it, Alice and the Red Queen are running hard but making no progress.

‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’

That is, in order to provide better public service at lower cost, we cannot simply run faster, or work harder. We need to transform the way we do things.

‘Transformation is not about squeezing ten per cent out of the budget,’ noted Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Hon. Tan Sri Dato Hj Muhyiddin Hj Mohd Yassin. It’s about bigger changes – for example the city of Putrajaya, where the summit was held, was a plantation 15 years ago and is now a thriving administrative centre.

About 1,000 delegates gathered in Putrajaya in October 2014 and we asked them why they came. Their answers ran nicely parallel to CAPAM’s mission of networking and knowledge sharing. They came to meet people, to make themselves known to others, to present their work, to learn things in their fields and to learn things from other fields. CAPAM invited more than 60 dignitaries and senior speakers to share insights and research in plenary sessions, panel discussions, presentations and workshops. One of the largest biennial conferences ever held by CAPAM, it was complemented by events held in parallel, including the Commonwealth Media Forum, hosted by the Government of Malaysia, and the Fifth Commonwealth Ministers of Public Service Forum, hosted by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

How does a public service transform?

The conference set out to have a ‘new conversation’ on the question of transformation, with cutting-edge research and practice on the agenda. Three themes prevailed:
1. **Shaping the future together.** The people dimension, highlighting engagement with citizens and public servants.

2. **Towards a better future.** Looking at the mechanisms of change, the processes, technologies, policies and management tools that will help us transform for a better future.

3. **Building global resilience.** Building a public service that is nimble and able to react to shifting trends.

**What did the leaders have to say?**

The new strategic direction emerging across the Commonwealth emphasises leadership, process and implementation. Leaders increasingly understand that success depends on clear articulation of missions and strategies, and the involvement/engagement of employees and citizens. It is a move from top-down silos to collaboration.

Delegates were welcomed by Tan Sri Dr Ali Hamsa, chief secretary to the government of Malaysia (and incoming CAPAM President), and by Paul Zahra, permanent secretary, Ministry of European Affairs, in the office of the Deputy Prime Minister, government of Malta (and outgoing CAPAM President).

Keynote speaker Hon. Jocelyne Bourgon – president of Public Governance International, former Clerk of the Privy Council, Canada, and former President of CAPAM – continued the theme, noting that we need to leverage the power of others, for example, through crowd-sourcing, co-creation and public–private partnerships. The silos that have served us well in the past need to be destroyed and replaced by relationships that propel society forward.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma, in a video appearance, reinforced that private sector growth and good public governance are inseparable. He stated that the role of the Commonwealth is to disseminate good practice based on shared values of democracy, development, respect for diversity and the goal of transforming public service for our citizens.

Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin represented the political level in his welcome. He noted the growing prominence of CAPAM and the support for the practical learning and exchange of good practices that it provides.

**The delegates’ discussions**

The speakers, most of whom were practising public servants or academics in the field of public service, shared their conceptual models and their experiences of putting the models into practice in their organisations. Tan Sri Dr Madinah binti Mohamad, secretary general for the Ministry of Education in Malaysia, introduced the morning’s ‘people’ theme by providing an overview of the host country’s transformational activities and outlining its various approaches towards preparing stakeholders for this change. Hon. Carolynn Seepersad-Bachan, Minister of Public Administration in Trinidad and Tobago, supported the sharing of political and public service power with citizens.
Dato Sri Dr Sharifah Zarah Syed Ahmad, deputy director-general of the Public Service Department of Malaysia, noted the difficulties some organisations have in moving from rowing to steering, with executives who are more into hierarchical compliance than innovation and service improvement. The challenges, she said, were that public service is still too centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic, lacking in transformational leadership, low on innovation and creativity, low on analytic ability, low on responsiveness and stuck in silos with limited external engagement.

Readers can burrow down into the 46 strategies and 190 initiatives designed to support the transformation in Malaysia, but should realise the cycle of transformation never ends – there is always redesign based on monitoring, evaluation and assessment of impacts.

Professor Dennis Hilgers of Johannes Kepler University in Austria was a particularly popular speaker. He suggested governments could use methods like those employed by InnoCentive.com to crowdsource solutions to difficult problems. He further explained that outsiders who may not be obvious are a major force for innovation that networking with obvious stakeholders won’t reach.

Graham Teskey, principal governance specialist for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, looked at what works in aid and development, and how resilience and more effective institutions are built. He did not advocate for any one best model for international agencies to be imposed, but pointed to key success factors, including voice and accountability; effective governance; regulatory quality; quality of public administration; and reduced corruption. In other words, the basis for development is trusted, honest governance and public service.

Mark Rozario, CEO of the Malaysia Innovation Agency, stressed the need to ‘embrace’ innovation, not just seek minor improvements. Leaders should demand results, with integrity, creating value through continuous improvement. Resilience and sustainability comes through empowered people providing excellent service. Better tools, design-focused thinking, enhanced delivery and public–private partnerships (PPPs) are all mechanisms that can be used.

Common threads and emerging ideas

The principles of good public management remain the same

Among several speakers who articulated this model, Daniel Watson (chief human resource officer for the government of Canada) shared how, on the Canadian Prairies where he grew up, the principles of farming had always been the same: prepare the soil, select the seed, ensure moisture and nutrition, remove the weeds and then, and only then, harvest the crop. These are the same principles as when land was first cultivated there in the 1880s and the same principles apply to farming in all 53 Commonwealth countries. For example, on the Canadian Prairies, an important tool is a huge, multiple-wheel drive tractor, with a six-speaker sound system, a cooler for drinks and a 20-bottom plough. It does a hectare in minutes. In Thailand, the equivalent is the ‘iron ox’, a small, walk-behind motorised one-bottom plough. Each tool is used for the same principle: to prepare the soil. But the huge Canadian tractor would soon bog down in the rice paddies of Thailand and the iron ox would take forever to break sod on huge Canadian farms. Same principles, differing practices. Analysis is needed as we share good practices, to understand the underlying principles and apply the tools appropriately to the situation.

Government is where the tough problems come to be addressed

Like Alice and the Red Queen, we need to learn to transform our organisations and our approaches to deal with future challenges.

Silos need to be broken down

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin stated: ‘The silo mentality needs to be broken down and organisations have to learn to work in unison, like the fingers of the hand. Structures and procedures need to be streamlined so that public servants can network with one another.’ Many other speakers repeated this sentiment.

Much of the innovation in governance has centred on task forces and teams – new governance structures outside the silos. But many speakers called for destruction of the silos and creation of new collaborative structures, rather than ‘work-arounds’ such as task forces and poking holes in the silos.

An internal locus of control

Some public servants feel overwhelmed; they feel pressurised to ‘do more with less’ or to become ‘more like the private sector’. But the leaders speaking at the conference had a more positive focus, which was that they were in control and were committed to ‘providing better service at lower cost’. Many exchanged information on techniques and tools with which to do this.

It is not enough to have a mandate to improve; the desire to improve must be embraced by all. Public service should be seen as an exciting opportunity to be innovative and improve service, while reducing costs. People need to be empowered more than pushed. They need to be provided with better tools.

Honesty and courage

‘Speaking truth to power’ is sometimes honoured more in the saying than the doing. At this conference, there was, among some speakers, a remarkable degree of candour.

Participants especially appreciated those speakers who showed honesty and courage, for example, by sharing their objectives, doing a gap analysis between the current state and the desired state that is not necessarily flattering, and following it with a plan on how the gaps would be closed.

International statements

People are not born citizens. We become citizens as we accept the constraints and responsibilities that come as a result of being a member of a broader community. Public institutions create citizens … some of the most intractable problems are not due to too much government but to a lack of state able to forge a united citizenry governed by a common rule.

Jocelyne Bourgon, president of Public Governance International

There is a tremendous intrinsic motivation to solve problems and contribute to solutions. Extrinsic rewards don’t hurt, but intrinsic motivation is powerful. Ask for help.

Professor Dennis Hilgers, Johannes Kepler University, Austria
Without honest self-assessment and reflection, it is very difficult to improve, but it can also be difficult to state that reality publicly. One participant observed: ‘I haven’t seen this type of presentation in a long time.’

It takes courage and insight to be so forthcoming. Greater use of those behaviours is part of the new conversation on transformation.

**Empowerment**

People should be given the freedom to do better.

**Public-private partnerships**

Many saw PPPs as a solution, while others noted some failures and the need for vigilance in their management.

**CAPAM’S 20th anniversary**

Bringing so many partners, experts, members, colleagues and friends together for a conference provided perfect timing and the best opportunity for CAPAM to celebrate its 20th anniversary. CAPAM produced a commemorative book that outlined its raison d’être and major accomplishments since it was established in 1994.

CAPAM is based in Canada and wanted to mark the occasion in a special way with something uniquely Canadian, but with an international flavour. With the support of Malaysian Airlines and Air Canada, the Quilt of Belonging was transported half way around the world for display at the conference.

The Quilt of Belonging is a 120-foot-long (36-metre) collaborative textile art project, a richly hued portrait of the human family. Its 263 blocks portray the rich cultural legacies of every nation of the world.

CAPAM delegates were wowed by the sheer size of the piece and they were moved by the careful attention to materials, patterns, craftsmanship and skill embodied in each country's block. It brought the delegates together in a way that we could not have anticipated and was an outstanding symbol to fete our organisation.

CAPAM shares experiences and provides a forum for the active exchange of innovation, knowledge and practice in citizen-centred service delivery. It promotes leadership development and public service management, serving as a centre of excellence. CAPAM is a networking organisation that promotes the practical requirements of good governance, and just and honest government across Commonwealth countries and beyond. It promotes excellence in good governance and supports the building of more responsive and dynamic public services.

**Further information on the CAPAM Biennial Conference**

It is next to impossible to summarise in an article 62 speakers and moderators, four plenary sessions and 17 concurrent discussions along with learning journeys, side events and all the helpful comments and questions that came together for this highly acclaimed conference.

The full conference report and many of the presentations and case studies are featured in CAPAM’s quarterly publication, the Commonwealth Innovations Review.

Current editions are available at www.capam.org.

All papers, workshops and presentations are posted for members to view in CAPAM’s e-library.