

# Research, Service Review and Evaluation Program

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*The Family Law Act (1975)* requires the Australian Institute of Family Studies to conduct and coordinate research to further understanding of the factors affecting family and marital stability in Australia.

Over the last twelve months, the Institute's research activities have followed the principles established in the *Research Plan 1999-2001* which was approved by the Board in March 1999. This set out four principal objectives for research:

- research should seek to develop our understanding of factors affecting successful family functioning at the micro level (relationships within families), the meso level (family cohesion) and the macro level (contribution to the wider society);
- research should be clearly related to current and emerging Government family policies and departmental and ministerial research priorities;
- research should produce outcomes which will inform family policies and other policies likely to impact directly on family stability; and
- research should develop new agendas such that the Institute provides intellectual leadership in the research and policy communities.

The Institute pursues these objectives through research which is organised into three programs:

- Children and Parenting Program
- Family and Marriage Program
- Family and Society Program

In addition, a *Research Operations Unit* supports and complements the research work undertaken in each of these programs.

## Overview

The year 1999–2000 has been a year of development and consolidation following the approval of the new Research Plan in March 1999.

Covering the three years to the end of 2001, the Research Plan established three research programs, each of which has responsibility for developing and conducting two major, core-funded projects at any one time, as well as carrying out contracted, collaborative and other related research activities as appropriate. The Plan requires that all new core project proposals should be subjected to rigorous external (as well as internal) refereeing in order to ensure the highest quality standards.

The Research Plan also created a new Research Operations Unit to back up each of these three program teams and to develop and manage a new Australian Family Panel Survey.

This restructuring of the organisation of research at the Institute required considerable changes in the staffing profile. In particular, new Principal Research Fellows were recruited to run each of the three research programs, and a Manager was appointed to run the Research Operations Unit. The restructure also created some new vacancies for other research staff to be recruited in all three programs.

Over the last year, each of the new research program teams has been working on existing core and contracted research projects, as well as developing new ones in consultation with key stakeholders. Each program has also been working closely with the Research Operations Unit in the development of the Australian Family Panel Survey, the first wave of which is expected to go into the field at or around the end of 2000.

### Work on existing projects

- In the *Children and Parenting Program*, the Australian component of the Parenting 21 project has been completed (a research monograph has been written up and is awaiting publication), although the international collaboration is continuing; a research monograph evaluating the Looking After Children initiative has been published; and three evaluation studies conducted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse on behalf of the Victorian State Government have been completed.
- In the *Family and Marriage Program*, analysis of the Australian Divorce Transitions project has been continuing throughout the year with several new papers published (including a special issue of *Family Matters*), and the related project on the impact of divorce on siblings has also continued. In addition, the Positive Family Relationships pilot project was successfully completed and two new, inter-related projects are to be established in this area (see below).
- In the *Family and Society Program*, the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project has continued with the completion of position papers on theorising and measuring 'social capital', as well as the publication of an edited volume of essays. Fieldwork is due to begin shortly. The contract on Trans-generational Income Support Dependency was successfully completed and has heralded a new direction of work on family and welfare policy (see below). Two collaborative projects on housing have also been successfully completed.

### Development of new projects

- In the *Children and Parenting Program*, work has begun on a new core project, Child Care in Cultural Context, and a report was prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services reviewing

parental demands for child care services. The Institute has also assumed responsibility for the long-running Australian Temperament Project, which will provide an instrument enabling research to be carried out on youth issues, and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse has undertaken two new projects on child abuse prevention programs.

- In the *Family and Marriage Program*, the successful pilot study on positive relationships has resulted in the development of two new linked projects, one using the Institute's new panel survey to track the factors promoting relationship success and stability, and the other classifying systems of premarriage and relationship education. The Institute is also now home to a study of jurisdictional overlaps between the Family Court of Australia and the Melbourne Children's Court.

- In the *Family and Society Program*, a special issue of *Family Matters* dealing with family policy and welfare reform met with critical acclaim and has been followed by the publication of a book, *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*, which contains an edited volume of essays on welfare reform. A new core project in the area of welfare policy will be developed in the coming months.

### Australian Family Panel Survey

Underpinning many of the Institute's current research initiatives is the planned Australian Family Panel Survey, a survey of around 15,000 people which will track issues of parenting, child welfare, relationship strength and social participation over time. The data collected in the survey will help inform work in all three program areas, as well as enabling the Institute to monitor and report on changes in the quality of family life and in family values on a regular basis. As time goes on, it is intended that the panel design should enable researchers to accumulate detailed longitudinal information which will enhance the quality and sophistication of analysis of the causes and consequences of family change in Australia.

The Australian Family Panel Survey is the responsibility of the new *Research Operations Unit* which is also responsible for monitoring trends in Australian family life, and for providing day-to-day technical and logistical support to the three program teams.

### Outputs

Outputs from Institute research have been widely disseminated in conferences in Australia and overseas (the latter including the conference of the National Council on Family Relations in California, the Child Protection conference in Hong Kong, and a workshop on Parents, Children and Schools in Spain). The Institute's work has attracted considerable attention in the media, including ABC National Radio and substantial features in the national press. It has also been disseminated through various different kinds of publications – reports, monographs, Working Papers, Briefing Papers, *Family Matters* articles, and articles in academic journals.

All of the research publications from the last year, as well as conference papers and other written outputs, are listed in the tables summarising research project performance listed at the end of this section.

### Other activities

Research staff have been active in developing the new research agenda and engaging with policy developments beyond the Institute. The Institute has hosted roundtables on future developments in marriage education research, on research on declining fertility rates, and on the development of family indicators as part of the Commonwealth Government's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*. *Family Matters* runs a regular feature updating readers on developments in the National Families Strategy, and the Institute is represented on the new Marriage and Family Council.

Institute researchers have also made submissions to various government inquiries, including the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee on pre-nuptial agreements,

the Attorney-General's inquiry on property settlements following divorce, and the Minister for Family and Community Services' reference group on welfare reform. In addition, research staff have contributed to a series of Commonwealth Government workshops on social capital, and to the Commonwealth–State Population workshop on trends in household and family formation, and have briefed the Productivity Commission and both the Victorian and New South Wales Departments of Human Services.

Researchers also engage positively with the voluntary sector and have participated in a wide range of speaking engagements including the National Marriage and Relationship Education annual conference, Relationships Australia Annual General Meeting, and the Domestic Violence Service conference.