

Director's report

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Following a year of reviewing, re-structuring and generally getting our house in order, we have entered 2006 with considerable momentum and are experiencing an appreciable expansion of our research program, especially related to the evaluations of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and the family law reforms. *Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics currently collecting the Wave 2 data, is going from strength to strength. I am especially pleased to see the steady increase in the use of the data by an ever-widening range of researchers to provide policy relevant findings from Wave 1. On the administrative front, we are focused on achieving, by 1 July, the changes recommended by the review of the Institute's governance and financial arrangements. In short, there is a great deal of positive activity at the Institute that is resulting in tangible outcomes.

National Research Priorities

Earlier in the year, we received a very gratifying report from the National Research Priorities (NRP) Standing Committee. They noted "that AIFS conducts research, disseminates research findings, and contributes to Government Policy, on factors affecting family stability and wellbeing in Australia, and AIFS is commended for its integration of the NRPs in its research framework. The inclusion of the goal of 'Strengthening Australia's Social and Economic Fabric' has resulted in a greater share of AIFS' research falling within the NRPs . . . Overall, the committee commends the work of the Institute in contributing to the NRPs and building research collaboration".

Strategic and Research Plans

We consulted extensively and sought feedback at several points in the preparation of our Strategic and Research

Plans. The constructive comments of those we consulted were thoughtfully considered and, where possible, have been incorporated in the plans. The plans have recently been approved by the Minister and are available on the Institute's web site (<http://www.aifs.gov.au>). This edition of *Family Matters* also contains an article outlining the background to the Research Plan and the consultative process that contributed to its development.

Legislative change for the Institute

On 1 July 2006, the Institute will move from its current Board structure under the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997*, to an Executive Management structure under the *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997*. The required legislative changes occurred in May. While this transition will change the legal status of the Institute, the name and functions of the organisation remain unchanged. The Institute will continue to generate excellent research into issues affecting families. An Advisory Council will be established to replace the Board and provide advice to me on the strategic directions and research initiatives of the Institute.

Family law research

In addition to the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse that I discussed in our last issue, we have been contracted by the Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) to undertake work related to the review of what is the largest set of family law reforms since the original passage of the *Family Law Act 1975*.

The Government has committed to the establishment of new and expanded services across the next four years. These include a network of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and changes to both the legislation and the court systems, processes and support. These are key priorities for the Government. Specifically, the establishment of the FRCs will involve a commitment of \$189 million and it is intended that these will be visible central entry points to the family law system.

There will be an increase in the number of mediators, with \$13.4 million committed over the next four years. With expenditure of \$23.3 million, the number of contact orders programs will quadruple over that time. There will be 30 new Children's Contact Services at a cost of \$17 million over the four years. Men and Family Relationships, Pre-marriage and Family Relationships Education, Counselling and Skills Training as well as Early Intervention Family Violence Responses will receive increases of almost \$70 million. *Mens Line Australia* will have its funding increased by \$12.4 million over the four year period. A further \$63.1 million will be spent to increase the funding level provided for the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). Finally, \$5.7 million will be spent over two years for a community education program. Clearly the Institute has experience and expertise to bring to bear on the evaluation of this major reform package.

New Institute Deputy Director (Corporate and Strategy)



I am pleased to announce that Ms Sue Tait has been appointed to this position. Ms Tait has extensive experience as a senior executive in both the public and community sectors. She joined the Institute in 2005, following experience as a General Manager in the not-for-profit sector. Prior to that she had extensive experience in Victorian Education, ranging from Principal to Regional Director and General Manager in the Office of School Education. She has also served as a Non-Executive Director on a range of community and education focused Boards. I am greatly looking forward to working with her in this new role.

Denise Swift will continue to provide strategic advice to the Executive Leadership Team and to complete a number of key projects to advance the recommendations of last year's external review of the Institute. I am delighted that Denise's wealth of experience and invaluable expertise will still be available to us.

Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) - Waves 2 and 3

Wave 2 of *Growing Up in Australia* is underway. Across the country, interviewers from the Australian Bureau of Statistics have started contacting the 10,000 families who took part in the study for the first time two years ago. Early reports from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that the study families are looking forward to the interview. With Wave 2 successfully in the field, Institute staff are working with the Design Team members to develop proposals for Wave 3 content.

Raising Children Network, Parenting Website launch

On 17 May, I attended the launch of the Parenting Website, which is a FaCSIA initiative funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Development of the website has been undertaken by the Raising Children Network, in collaboration with the Centre for Community Child Health. The content has been developed in co-operation with a large number of academics in early childhood, paediatrics, and public health, among others. The Australian Council for Educational Research is evaluating the website and its impact. It should be a very valuable resource for families across the nation and is available online at <http://www.raisingchildren.net.au>.

Social Innovation Dialogue

In April, I attended the Social Innovation Dialogue, which was organised and sponsored by Mission Australia, Macquarie Bank and FaCSIA. It brought together 60 participants from the OECD's program on Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED), policy makers and chief executives from several European nations, and the UK, as well as chief executives of key community organisations in the not-for-profit sector, senior representatives of business and philanthropy and executives from relevant public sector organisations at state and territory governments. The Hon Kevin Andrews MP attended on Saturday morning and was the lead speaker on Work and Family issues and the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Mal Brough MP, attended on Saturday afternoon. The presenters included Lord Hastings of Scarisbrick, CBE, the Head Of Corporate Social Responsibility for the BBC and Noel Pearson, the Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership. It was an excellent event. One of the organisers was Dr Marie Leech, a member of our Board.

Families, Work and Wellbeing Forum and National Families Week

The Families, Work and Wellbeing Forum was organised in May in Canberra by Families Australia. A number of Institute staff attended, and as part of National Families Week, the Institute distributed a brochure on families with adolescents. This is an excellent compilation of relevant statistics on the characteristics and aspirations of adolescents and their families. Copies are available online at the Institute's website <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/snapshots/adolescents>. Well done to Lixia Qu, Grace Soriano, Ruth Weston and Matthew Gray in preparing the brochure.

Indigenous Affairs joins the portfolio

Following the changes announced by the Prime Minister on 24 January 2006, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) became part of the new Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) portfolio. The OIPC coordinates a whole-of-government approach to programs and services for Indigenous Australians, including advising the Minister and Government on Indigenous Issues and managing and servicing a network of Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) across Australia.

Encouraged by the bipartisan support of state and territory governments, Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, has committed himself to furthering the government's Indigenous policy reform agenda. In a widely publicised speech to business leaders on 29 April the Minister said, "My own experience in visiting Aboriginal communities and listening to their concerns has also convinced me of the urgent need to look for a better way to target assistance to this small group of vulnerable Australians and ensure that welfare payments build stronger families, not inadvertently provide the means to destroy them".

In April, the Federal Government committed \$3 million in funding to the Cape York Institute to undertake research into community-based approaches to delivering welfare to Indigenous families. Noel Pearson Director of the Cape York Institute, and a contributor to this Institute's 2000 publication, *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*, welcomed the funding, which will enable his Institute to "investigate innovative mechanisms to ensure that the support is not inducing passivity, and is really going to support the children and families for whom it is meant".

This edition of *Family Matters* contains two articles on Indigenous families, which highlight the particular pressures and difficulties facing them, and the need for more research on Indigenous families.

Our 2006-08 Research Plan includes a new focus on Indigenous Australians. We are keen to develop our capacity to undertake research on the particular issues Indigenous families face, and the policies that have the best chance of meeting their needs. The Institute will, in partnership with Indigenous Australians, undertake appropriate consultation about research questions and approaches, flowing from our Research Plan. I am also exploring ways that the Institute can contribute to the development of Indigenous researchers through the establishment of research traineeships.

Closing comments

The foundations we laid last year are providing a sound base for the expansion of the Institute's research program. Finalisation of the new Strategic and Research Plans provides clear direction for the future. The prominence of families in policy and practice, together with the current growth of the research program, make this a very exciting time to be working in these areas.

