



We have made a very smooth transition to our new portfolio and are actively engaged in a number of collaborations with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Staff of the Institute have made presentations as part of the Department's seminar series, several officers of PM&C have now visited the Institute and our staff are regularly at the Department in Canberra. The new Secretary of the Department, Terry Moran, and I met on 7 April and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that will enable us to undertake a range of projects for the Department. Our major projects for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Attorney-General's Department continue to make pleasing progress.

## **Economy and society**

The current international economic circumstances are indeed challenging. The focus of policy on productivity is entirely understandable. So too is the emphasis on employment participation, given a very tight labour market, serious skill shortages, and the importance of building Australia's human capital. At the recent 2008 Economic and Social Outlook Conference presented by *The Australian* and the Melbourne Institute, there were many very valuable analyses of the economic challenges and choices facing the nation. Less was said about the social underpinnings and implications; nevertheless, at a time of economic challenge it is vital that we do not lose sight of the balance between the social and the economic. Families and their wellbeing are the foundation of our social and economic wellbeing. The Institute's involvement in the areas of work and family, social inclusion, relationship trends, and neighbourhood and community factors that influence outcomes for children are key considerations for the future direction of the nation.

## **Research news**

### **New ARC grant**

With Professor Dorothy Scott, Professor Cathy Humphries and Dr Fiona Arney of the University of South Australia, Dr Leah Bromfield and Dr Daryl Higgins have been successful in winning an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant to examine the role of research in social policy development, especially in the area of child protection.

### **AIFS Advisory Council**

The first meeting of the AIFS Advisory Council was held in late September 2007. Chaired by Diane Gibson, the inaugural Council members include Glenys Beauchamp, Professor John Dewar, Thelma Gertz and Marie Leech. Three additional appointments will be made to the Council this year. The Advisory Council provides specialist advice to the Director in relation to the Institute's research strategic directions and performance.

### **Research Plan 2009–2011**

Planning is underway for the development of the next triennial Research Plan for the Institute. The process will start

with a final review of outcomes against the 2006–2008 plan. A key feature of the development of the current plan was the process of national consultation. It is again intended to hold consultations with key stakeholders as part of the process of developing the next plan.

### **Magellan Evaluation Report Launch**

On 19 October 2007, the Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia, The Hon. Justice Diana Bryant, publicly released the Institute's evaluation of the Magellan project—the court's interagency management model for handling cases of serious child abuse. The report has attracted very positive media coverage. Dr Daryl Higgins is to be congratulated on an excellent piece of work. The full report can be accessed online from: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/magellan](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/magellan)

## **Conferences, workshops and meetings**

### **Indigenous out-of-home care**

In collaboration with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (SNAICC), staff of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse are conducting workshops around the country to assist workers from a range of government and non-government agencies to examine their current policies and practices, and identify promising approaches in the light of the contemporary evidence base. This is a valued partnership in an area of great national significance.

### **AIFS Conference 2008**

Planning is well underway for the 10th AIFS Conference to be held in Melbourne from 9 to 11 July. The response to the call for papers has been overwhelming. As a result, extra strands have been added to the program and those whose proposals for oral presentations could not be accommodated have been invited to submit a poster presentation. In this way, we have been able to provide the maximum number of opportunities for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to draw their work to the attention of the participants. Information on the conference is available at: [www.aifsconference08.com](http://www.aifsconference08.com)

## **Visitors**

### **New Zealand Families Commissioner**

Lyn Campbell, Commissioner, NZ Families Commission visited the Institute on 18 March. Commissioner Campbell was particularly interested in the Institute's evaluation of the Family Law Reforms. Members of the Family Law Evaluation team provided a briefing on the various aspects of the evaluation, including the studies being conducted as part of the Families Project, the Legislation and Courts Project, and the Service Provision Project.

### **Netherlands Delegation**

On 15 February, we hosted a visit from a delegation from the Netherlands comprising approximately 20 senior level representatives from labour market and social security organisations. The labour market and social policy fields are

very much interlinked in the Netherlands and most participants in the group are responsible for both. A particular interest for them with respect to AIFS is the nexus between the labour market framework (including private provision of services) and issues of social exclusion: the access of disadvantaged groups to the service network, cumulations of social problems (poor education, poor housing, lone parenthood, health problems), and in particular where such problems are concentrated. The group also provided their own valuable insights and experiences.

## Director's activities

### Launch of Australia's Welfare 2007

I attended the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) conference, Australia's Welfare 2007, on 6 December. The Minister for Housing and Status of Women, The Hon. Tanya Plibersek launched the report *Australia's Welfare 2007*. The keynote speaker was Monsignor David Cappo AO, the South Australian Commissioner for Social Inclusion. I was one of the team of reviewers of the publication and was invited to chair the session on Children, Youth and Families. Following the keynote address and the ministerial launch, I chaired the session presented by Cynthia Kim and Sushma Mathur (Children, Youth and Families Unit, AIHW), and Professor Ilan Katz (Director, Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW).

### ARACY/SPRC Early Childhood Meeting

On 21–22 February, I attended this workshop, which was held at the University of New South Wales to explore the development of international research collaborations focused on early childhood education and care. With participants from the UK, Canada, the US, Sweden and New Zealand, as well as from across Australia, it was a very stimulating event. It highlighted the considerable energy that is focused on early childhood policy, both here and overseas.

### Mildura graduation

On 29 February, I was invited to present the Occasional Address to the graduates of the Mildura Campus of La Trobe University. I spoke on the importance of families to educational achievement. Staff of the Mildura campus expressed their interest in the Institute's work and our possible involvement in a conference on issues confronting rural and regional families and communities.

## Diana Smart



We congratulate Diana Smart on her recent appointment as General Manager, Research. Diana joined the Institute in 2000. Her research career includes positions with the Victorian Education Department's Curriculum and Research Branch, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's Education Unit, and twelve years as the Research Manager of the Australian Temperament Project research study. Diana will be involved in managing longitudinal research projects within the Institute, primarily the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Diana specialises in research on temperament and children's development, adolescent and youth development research, the management and analysis of large survey data sets, and quantitative research methods and analysis.

## Ruth Weston

### Australia Day Honours 2008—Public Service Medal



I am delighted to advise that Ruth Weston, one of the Institute's most senior and experienced researchers, was awarded the Public Service Medal in the 2008 Australia Day Honours in recognition of her many outstanding contributions. The announcement stated:

*For outstanding public service as a researcher and contributor to policy development, particularly in the areas of separation and divorce, family law, family relationships, fertility decision-making and child support.*

Mrs Weston has worked at the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1982 and has excelled as a researcher. Her work has had a major impact on knowledge about Australian families and on the quality of family statistics collected in Australia. She has significantly advanced the understanding of long-term demographic trends in couple and family formation, dissolution and reformation, the emotional and financial consequences of divorce, and the factors that influence decisions about having children. Most recently, her research was central to the outcome of the Ministerial Task Force on Child Support. Mrs Weston has worked with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and many other departments and agencies, and her active participation in major surveys has enabled her to make groundbreaking contributions to family studies in Australia. She also played a key leadership role in the Institute's outreach to countries in the Asia-Pacific region, contributing to the development of research, coordinating and hosting visits to Australia by overseas delegations, and representing Australia at major forums and meetings.

On behalf of all at the Institute, I extend our heartiest congratulations to Ruth Weston PSM!

## Concluding thoughts

The Institute continues to experience expanding opportunities to contribute research to inform policy development across a range of areas. This is a product of the across-government role of the Institute, and the recognition by government of the interconnectedness of family policy across portfolios.

Recruitment of staff, restructuring organisationally and enhancement of facilities have been timely in enabling the Institute to grasp the new opportunities that are now being presented. In February, we celebrated our first year in our new premises. The new facilities function well and the transition has been very positive. We are capitalising on our enhanced information technology capacity, an example of which is the move to make selected seminar presentations available by podcast, accessible from the Institute's website. This is a very positive initiative that extends the value of the Institute's already considerable Internet presence.

It is essential that we maintain the dynamism, vigour and policy relevance of the Institute's research and dissemination activities. Through these, the Institute can maintain its strong contributions to the policy agendas that will underpin Australia's economic prosperity and social wealth.