

Research, Service Review and Evaluation Program

3

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.

In March 1999, the Board of Management approved the Institute's new *Research Plan 1999–2001* which sets out four principal objectives for the Institute's research activities:

- research should derive directly from the Institute's charter and corporate plan and should therefore be addressed to issues affecting successful family functioning;
- 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.

In order to fulfil these objectives, the Research Plan went on to establish three research programs within which all future projects will be contained:

- *The Children and Parenting Program*: What types of family and child care arrangements are most likely to maximise the wellbeing of children?
- *The Family and Marriage Program*: What factors are most likely to promote happy and stable family unions?
- *The Family and Society Program*: Under what conditions can families best contribute to good citizenship and a vibrant community life?

In addition, the Research Plan also established a new *Research Operations Unit* to support and complement the research work undertaken in each of these programs.

Overview

The year 1998–99 has been a year of transition for the Institute's Research, Service Review and Evaluation Program. A new Research Plan, covering the three years to the end of 2001, was approved in March 1999, and this set out to define more clearly the research priorities of the Institute by building on its existing strengths while taking account of new intellectual and policy agendas.

The Research Plan established three research programs and reorganised staffing so as to create distinct research teams attached to each program. It also created a new Research Operations Unit to back up each of these teams and to develop and manage a new Family Panel Survey. A major recruiting exercise is now under way to appoint heads of each of the three programs, as well as a Surveys Manager to run the Research Operations Unit, and some new, more junior, research staff.

Given this fundamental reorganisation, a decision was made not to proceed with any new project proposals until the new research teams were fully established. It was also decided that all future core project proposals should be subjected to rigorous external refereeing, and that no more than two core-funded projects should be undertaken by each research team at any one time.

Most of the work undertaken since the approval of the Research Plan has therefore involved either continuing with ongoing projects or completing ongoing tasks. A number of projects have been successfully concluded. These include the Looking After Children evaluation, the Later Life Families study, the Newtown Revisited study, and the Australian Living Standards study, as well as the Spousal Violence contract for the Office of the Status of Women. In some cases, project plans have been revised – for example,

the planned Stage 2 of the Australian Family Life Course Study will not now go ahead, for this is now superseded by plans for a new Family Panel Survey. In other cases, new project proposals have been put on hold pending the appointment of the new area program heads (for example, proposals for a new study of fathering are now pending). A decision on whether to develop further the existing Parenting 21 project is also currently under review.

Only two new core projects have started in this last year. One is the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project in the Family and Society program. This project had already been planned under the earlier title of 'Social Exchanges' and it was approved in March. It is grounded in the growing academic and governmental interest in the question of how best to nurture the institutions and sense of trust that underpin a vibrant and supportive community life, and these issues were addressed in a one-day conference in Canberra earlier this year hosted by the research team. Fieldwork for this project will start early next year.

The other new core-funded project to go ahead this year, albeit on a pilot basis, is the 'Positive Marriage and Family Relationships' study in the Family and Marriage Program. This project anticipated the emphasis in the Government's recently-launched National Families Strategy on marriage education and the prevention of family dissolution, and in conjunction with this project the Institute is planning a round table discussion of research on marriage education, to take place in September 1999.

A new contract project, on intergenerational income support dependency, and a new collaborative study on labour market inequalities, have also been started this year, both of them in the Family and Society program.

Major existing projects which are planned to continue into next year include the Australian Divorce Transitions project in the Family and Marriage program (fieldwork is complete and analysis and publication are well under way), and the various evaluation projects being conducted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Various collaborative projects (for example, Australia's Housing Choices) are also ongoing.

Outputs from these various research projects have been published in one or more of four modes of dissemination: *Briefing Papers* (short, topical and accessible papers aimed mainly at the media and the policy community); *Working Papers* (full-length academic-style papers which are refereed, often presented at conferences, and which may later be reworked for submission to academic journals); *Family Matters* articles (aimed at spreading research results to a wider audience of professionals, students and interested lay readers); and other *Reports and Monographs* (including specialist reports to commissioning bodies or government inquiries, and academic monographs such as 'Social Change, Suburban Lives', based on the findings of the Newtown Revisited project). 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.

As regards the future, the most exciting initiative is undoubtedly the new Family Panel Survey which should go into the field for its first sweep in the first half of 2000. There are a number of practical advantages in the development of a single panel study to replace the series of one-off surveys which the Institute has normally run in the past. These include lower refusal rates, greater predictability

in the planning of the annual use of the Institute's computer-aided telephone interviewing system (CATI), the ability to respond swiftly to requests for specific kinds of data, and easier identification of samples representing a particular sub-group of the population. The major advantage, however, is that as time goes on, the panel design will enable the accumulation of information stretching back over a period of years, and this will enormously enhance the quality of the analysis that can be achieved.

In the Children and Parenting program, for example, the new panel survey is expected to track the impact on children of different patterns and styles of parenting and out of home care. In the Family and Marriage program, it should test predictive models of marital stability and thus enable the evaluation of the likely success or failure of interventions such as marriage education and counselling. In the Family and Society program, it should gauge the impact of social policy changes on family self-reliance and on the quality of community life.

In addition to the new Family Panel Survey, the Institute will also be starting some new projects over the next twelve months in both the Children and Parenting and Family and Society programs (various proposals are under consideration, and some of these are outlined briefly in the Research Plan). We shall also be developing a new set of web pages through which to disseminate our continuing work in monitoring Australian family trends.

This has been an exciting year. The Institute has produced some strong and innovative research, and in the next twelve months, as the new structure introduced by the Research Plan beds down, we should go on to make even more telling contributions to our understanding of family life in Australia.