The "new" Institute

On 1 July 2006, the Institute moved 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 statutory functions that were previously the responsibility of the Institute and its Board, now rest with the Director.

While this transition changes the legal status of the Institute, its name, aims and functions remain the same. As an independent statutory authority, the Institute will continue to undertake rigorous, relevant research that is responsive to the needs of policy makers, practitioners and the wider community. An Advisory Council will be established to provide advice on the research strategic directions and initiatives of the Institute.

The smooth transition to the "new" Institute was achieved with the hard work of the team at the Institute and the able support received from the Departments of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and Finance. I thank all concerned for an outstanding achievement.

Focus on family law

From the outset, an important aspect of the Institute’s work has involved the monitoring and evaluation of research, policies and practices focused on promoting and sustaining positive family relationships. Much of our work also involves examining ways in which relationships may be strengthened in their early stages and identifying factors that contribute to relationship quality and stability. Our work on the case for marriage, for example, focuses on the extent to which marriage confers a range of advantages on individuals and couples. There is much to be learned from examining the sources of stability in long lasting relationships.

I am delighted that the Institute is playing a key role in monitoring and evaluating the new family law system, which came into effect on 1 July this year. In addition to developing a conceptual framework for the evaluation, five projects form the hub of our current family law research: caring for children after parental separation; understanding contact disputes; family law data mapping; allegations of family violence in the context of family law proceedings; and the experience of parents and children after family court decisions about relocation. Funding for the evaluation is being provided by the Departments of the Attorney General (AGD) and FaCSIA.

Considerable effort has gone into collecting baseline data prior to the implementation of the new reforms. The data address the comprehensive nature of the new family law system. This is an exciting opportunity for the Institute to provide the research and evaluation evidence to frame policy in a crucially important area for Australian society. The wellbeing of family relationships is the foundation of a strong, vibrant and caring society.

Longitudinal research

The Institute has an expanding involvement in some of Australia’s key longitudinal studies. The growth in this area has warranted creation of a new General Manager - Research position, recently filled by Robert Johnstone (see boxed text, below). While Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is the flagship, the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Australian Temperament Project (ATP) are two other key collaborative projects with which the Institute is involved.

Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australia Children

Understanding the impact of our unique social and cultural context on the next generation is crucial to shaping Australia’s future. Growing up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is designed to provide this vital information and, following the release of the first wave of data in 2005, is beginning to realise this prospect. The study is progressing well and researchers, policymakers and practitioners are increasingly using the data.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is well advanced in the collection of the wave 2 data and the high retention rate of families from wave 1 to wave 2 is pleasing. Institute staff are preparing the data collected in wave 1.5 for public release. Development of the content for wave 3 to be conducted in 2008 is already well advanced. Later this year, the ABC will screen a two part Film Australia Documentary based on LSAC. In addition, planning is underway for the first LSAC Conference to occur before the end of this year.

Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

The Institute continues its active involvement in the Household Income and Labour Dynamic in Australia (HILDA) survey. The consortium conducting the survey comprises the Melbourne University, the University of Sydney, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Institute. With considerable experience and a long record of achievement and experience to the position of Coordinator of HILDA, Zoe Morrison is well placed to lead this important research project.

Zoe Morrison is the new Coordinator of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA). Zoe has worked at the Victorian Law Reform Commission on the family violence project, which recommended fundamental reform to family violence laws and policy. She is the author of a report into matters of child abuse and sexual assault in the Anglican Church in Adelaide (‘the Morrison Report’). During her time in the UK, she was a College Lecturer in human geography and Research Fellow in gender studies at Oxford University, where she also studied for her PhD on ‘social exclusion’ as a Rhodes Scholar. I am delighted to welcome Zoe to the Institute. She brings an outstanding record of achievement and experience to the position of Coordinator of ACSSA.

Robert Johnstone

I am pleased to announce the recent promotion of Robert Johnstone to the position of General Manager - Research, with particular responsibility for the Institute’s suite of longitudinal research and evaluation projects. Robert Johnstone is a psychologist who joined the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2003 as a research fellow working on Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). His recent work for the Institute has included the development and management of Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA), a longitudinal study of families that is a key element of the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Robert brings to his new position extensive experience in research and policy development and a record of winning grants and disseminating them nationally and internationally.
The Australian Temperament Project

The Institute for Applied Economic and Social Research (the lead agency), the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Wave 5 of the survey was completed in 2005 and since the first wave almost 14,000 respondents from 7,680 households have contributed data. Institute researchers are actively using the data to address a range of research questions of policy relevance. Funded by FaCSIA, the HILDA survey is a landmark national longitudinal study.

A new focus on caring

In addition to the work the Institute has been involved in related to child care (Child Care in Australia, Child Care in Cultural Context and the Child Care Choices projects), we have been commissioned by FaCSIA to undertake a project in collaboration with staff of the Disability Carers Branch, investigating the perceived impact on families of caring for a person with a disability. Comparing and contrasting families with and without a member with a disability, the project focuses particularly on the physical, emotional, social and financial impacts on families, as well as implications for their relationships and labour force participation.

Child protection and out-of-home care

Institute staff have been involved in two key national events in the area of child protection and out-of-home care. Staff of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse presented papers at the Out-of-Home Care Research Forum: From Research to Action, jointly convened by the Institute, the Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council (CSMAC), and the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWA), in Brisbane, on 19 May.

The second event, the National Child Protection Forum hosted by FaCSIA, took place in Melbourne, from 27-28 June. An outcome of the Forum was a proposal for a national strategy for child protection to provide a national collaborative approach to improving the care and safety of all children in Australia.

Elly Robinson

Elly Robinson is the Manager of the newly established Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse. Prior to joining the Institute, Elly worked in a range of capacities, with a particular focus on the translation of research and theory for the use of practitioners, students and the general public, at Jesuit Social Services and the Centre for Adolescent Health. Under Elly’s leadership the Clearinghouse team aims to improve the wellbeing of families and family members by supporting practitioners, service providers and policy makers in the development and delivery of family and relationship programs. Elly is responsible for the team developing resources and information to be disseminated via the Clearinghouse.

Susan Leong

Susan Leong has recently joined us as Chief Finance Officer. A Fellow Certified Practising Accountant, Susan brings to the Institute extensive experience in the public, not-for-profit and private sectors, most recently having worked for the Victorian Government. Already, she has played a vital part in planning and implementing the Institute’s new financial management and accountability systems. Susan is also actively involved in the processes of review and re-development of the Institute’s financial policies and procedures. Several new staff have joined Susan in the finance and accounting team and she is a key member of the strategic leadership group within the Institute. At a time of growth in the Institute’s commissioned and contract research and dissemination activities, the strategic and operational skills Susan brings are vital.

Vice-regal visit

On Friday, 4 August, the Institute hosted a visit by Their Excellencies, the Governor-General and Mrs Jeffery. Their Excellencies’ interest in the Institute and its work is greatly appreciated. The visit provided a valuable opportunity to present some of the Institute’s latest findings and to engage in a stimulating exchange of ideas. The first copy of the Proceedings of the International Forum on Family Relationships in Transition, 1-2 December 2005, was presented to His Excellency as a memento of his contributions to the International Forum.

Final thoughts

On behalf of the Institute, may I thank all who have over the years served as members of the Board of Management for so generously giving of their time, expertise and wisdom to support our research and ensure the good governance of the Institute. I would especially acknowledge Dianne Gibson, our last Presiding Member, for her skilled leadership of the Board. The wise counsel of Dianne, the members of the Board and former Directors and staff has been invaluable.

While this is the end of an era, it is the beginning of another. I remain unsurprisingly confident that the Institute will adapt and thrive. We build on the excellent foundations established by those who preceded us, staff and Board members alike, and the “new” Institute is well positioned to move forward, strongly. While of perennial significance, family studies take on even greater significance in the present era of accelerating social change.