



Family Relationship Services
A U S T R A L I A

Attention: Productivity Places Program

Transmission by email: productivityplaces@deewr.gov.au

30 April 2008

To Whom It May Concern

FRSA is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government's Skilling Australia for the Future: Discussion Paper 2008

Family Relationships Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for the family relationships services sector. FRSA provides national leadership and representation for the development and delivery of quality services and public policy relevant to individuals and family relationships.

FRSA has a broad and inclusive membership. Member organisations range in size from small local community organisations to large multi-function state-wide service providers. They include secular and faith based organisations, operating high quality professional services. We also have a number of Associate member organisations that support our work and that of our members, including leading national non-profits and research institutes.

In considering the Discussion Paper, FRSA has focussed its response to Phase 2: Existing Workers and Jobseeker Places from 1 July 2008 to 31 December 2008 and the issue for discussion:

- How can this program be managed to best meet the needs of employers?

FRSA looks forward to continuing this dialogue with the Department and Skills Australia and would welcome the opportunity to provide further clarification on any of the issues raised within our response.

Yours sincerely

Naomi Knight
Policy and Research Director



Submission to Skills Australia 2008

30 April 2008

Skilling Australia for the future



Overview

Family Relationships Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for the family relationships services sector. Our mission is to provide national leadership and representation for the development and delivery of quality services and public policy relevant to individual and family relationships. To achieve this mission, FRSA receives Federal Government funding and financial contributions from member organisations.

Established in July 2007, through the collaborative efforts of three national networks – Family Services Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia and Relationships Australia - FRSA has a broad and inclusive membership. Member organisations range in size from small local community organisations to large service providers operating across State and Territory jurisdictions. They include both secular and faith based organisations, operating high quality professional services. We also have a number of Associate member organisations that support our work, including leading national non-profit organisations and research institutes.

To be eligible for full membership of FRSA an organisation must be receiving Federal Government funding through the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). This program is administered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and jointly funded by FaHCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD). The program currently funds 105 organisations to deliver services in more than 400 locations across Australia. More information on the Family Relationship Services Program and the services provided is available from www.fahcsia.gov.au/frsp and www.familyrelationships.gov.au.


Family relationship service providers employ people in a diverse range of positions, including:

- Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners
- Family Counsellors
- Children's Contact Centre Managers and Staff
- Family Relationship Educators and Skills Trainers
- Parenting advisers

To meet the complex and challenging needs of Australian families experiencing relationship breakdown, practitioners require qualifications, specialist training and appropriate experience.

FRSA is a member of the Community, Social and Health Services Industry Skills Council (CSHISC) and has provided input into the draft environmental scan prepared by CSHISC.

In acknowledging the priority areas for skills development identified by the ISC in the draft environmental scan, FRSA contends that there is a significant need for government investment in the family relationship services sector through the allocation of a number of the Productivity Program Places for existing workers, in order for the continuation of best quality service provision.





Environmental Context

There are more than a million children who have one parent living elsewhere.¹ The negative impact of separation and family breakdown on children is largely due to “inter – parent conflict both before and after separation”². There is substantial evidence linking the degree of conflict in the co-parental relationship to children’s adjustment post-separation and that unresolved, enduring parental conflict can violate children’s core developmental needs and threaten their psychological growth.³ In addition, children’s healthy development is at risk if family break up results in poverty and homelessness.⁴

Statistical Snapshot – Family Households in Australia, ABS Data

- There were 5.2 million family households in Australia in 2006.
- 37% or 1.9 million are couple families with children or dependent students.
- 10.7% or 559,469 are one parent families with children or dependent students.
- Of the couple families, 89% are ‘intact’ families while 11% are step or blended families.
- The probability that a marriage will end in divorce has been increasing gradually over time, it is currently around 33%.
- Around half of those who divorce remarry - the proportion of step or blended families are increasing (10.7%).

The links between family relationship breakdown, poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage⁵ and homelessness are well documented.⁶ Unemployment and low incomes can have a direct impact on family breakdown, domestic violence and child abuse,⁷ whilst family breakdown is among the risk factors for suicidal behaviour.⁸

“The costs of parental divorce have implications not just for the individuals concerned but for society more broadly. i.e. current high adult depression levels were reported by 9.0% of those from divorced families compared to 6.0% of those from intact families...”⁹

Family relationship breakdown often results in lone families experiencing multiple factors of social exclusion as well as deprivation, social disadvantage and poverty, with family members often ‘losing out’ or ‘dropping off the edge’ of socioeconomic prosperity and positive health outcomes.¹⁰

In 1998 the House of Representatives Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs noted that the cost of marriage breakdown to the broader Australian community was \$2.7 billion per annum, and that this was considered a ‘conservative estimate’.¹¹ While the true economic, social, emotional,

¹ AIHW (2007) pg 27

² Ellis (2000); McIntosh (2003); Booth & Amato (2001)

³ see for example Kelly (1993)

⁴ Melbourne City Mission (2007) pg 9

⁵ Brotherhood St Laurence (2006) pg 11; ABS (2001) notes that the index used “variables that reflect disadvantage rather than measure specific aspects of disadvantage for example indigenous, separated / divorced.”

⁶ FaSCIA Research News 29 pg 14 “Marriage including living in a de facto relationship, is an important factor associated with lower likelihood of being ‘in poverty’.


⁷ Vinson (2007) pgs 2,18,20


⁸ Ibid p 17.

⁹ FaSCIA Research News 28 pg 5

¹⁰ SPRC (2007) pg 89

¹¹ FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 40





health and other costs of family breakdown are unlikely to ever be quantified, the daily effects of family breakdown on all Australians has been recognised by successive Federal Governments' committing to funding family relationship services located in the community.

Benefits of Service Delivery

Family Relationship Services are cost-effective and widely supported by the community. Program and service evaluation research over the 40 year history of the FRSP has consistently identified the benefits to individuals, families and the broader community, particularly in relation to tangible improvements in relationships, cooperation between parents – whether as partners or separated and parental capacity. Delivered by community organisations that are embedded in local communities, the family relationship services that we represent enjoy strong community support.

Reports commissioned by FaHCSIA highlight the cost effectiveness of the FRSP program; however it is noted that Commonwealth funds account for less than 75 percent of organisations funding.¹² Low cost, non adversarial family dispute resolution processes have substantially contributed to the economic and social productivity of individuals, extended family members and developing children. The first eighteen months of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and visiting outreach services across regional and remote Australia, does appear to have supported separating parents across the range of FRSP programs.

The establishment of FRCs and the implementation of the Family Law Reforms were supported by the family relationships sector and the sector has worked extraordinarily hard to ensure their success.


FRCs and the implementation of the Family Law Reforms by the family relationship services sector have benefitted many Australian families in developing positive relationships before, during and after relationship formation and dissolution.


Workforce and skills shortages

Consistent with the broader community and welfare sector, there is a significant and growing workforce shortage in the family relationship service sector. The number of practitioners required is not large in comparison to bigger industries (estimated at 2,500-4,000) currently employed, but it is critical that there is an adequate pool of appropriately qualified practitioners available to meet the demand in order to ensure continuity in service provision.

The continuity of service delivery is important to a number of key Federal Government initiatives including family law reform which has introduced compulsory family dispute resolution for parties seeking a hearing in the Family Court of Australia or Federal Magistrates Court.

¹² FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 116





In recognition of the importance of this sector, the Federal Government recently invested in the development of new vocational qualifications for practitioners employed within family relationship services. These qualifications are:

- Certificate IV in Children's Contact Service Work
- Diploma of Children's Contact Service Work
- Diploma of Family Intake and Support Work
- Vocational Graduate Diploma of Relationship Counselling
- Vocational Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution
- Certificate IV in Relationship Education
- Diploma of Relationship Education

A number of FRSA member organisations are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and several other organisations have collaborative relationships with local RTOs. We are hopeful that RTOs with a strong connection to the family relationship services sector will begin making these qualifications available in the near future. There is a particular urgency in relation to family dispute resolution which has new accreditation requirements coming into effect in July 2009.


A survey of FRSP provider organisations conducted in 2004 found that the majority of practitioners hold degree qualifications in social science, law and/or counselling. There is increasing competition for these skill areas and a national undersupply of graduates from key areas such as social work, psychology and counselling.


The current undersupply of qualified practitioners poses a significant threat to the capacity of the family relationships sector to effectively deliver the program. FRSA seeks to work with Skills Australia to increase the number of qualified practitioners through both tertiary and vocational pathways.

Existing worker access to VET Qualifications

FRSA recently made representations on behalf of members to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations over the draft VET FEE HELP guidelines which at page 2 appear to limit the eligibility to provide VET FEE-HELP to training providers whose primary purpose is education.

This would potentially exclude many of the RTOs working in the community and welfare sector, particularly those training practitioners for highly specialised work in family relationship services. Many of these RTO's have been established to meet the shortfall in appropriately skilled and trained people. This need has generally not been taken up by the private RTO's which often do not have access to the expert content knowledge to deliver the relevant qualification. In addition, what has arisen through these RTOs is they have become the main mechanism for transferring the latest skills and learnings from the programs into the workforce of the welfare and family relationship services sector as a whole.






Organisations such as Relationships Australia and the UnitingCare Institute of Family Practice (an RTO under UnitingCare NSW/ACT) have as their primary focus the delivery of services to Australian families. The expert training that is provided is an important component of this but could not be considered the primary purpose of the organisation.

Our understanding of this requirement of the 'principle purpose is to provide education' is designed to exclude enterprise RTOs from being an approved VET FEE-HELP provider. Of crucial importance is that the majority of the RTOs operated by family relationship service providers do not function as enterprise RTOs. They were not established to train the new staff of the organisation that the RTO belongs to. These RTOs provide qualifications for people wanting to work within the sector once they have become qualified. Usually students are studying full-time or employed in work outside the welfare and family relationship services sector while they are becoming qualified.

There is a risk that the draft guidelines, as they are currently written, will exclude RTOs within our sector from providing VET FEE-HELP. As a result people seeking to obtain qualifications to work in this sector, or existing workers seeking to obtain new compulsory VET qualification will face significant financial barriers. Given the relatively low pay rates in the community sector this could significantly impact on our capacity to attract new practitioners and retain existing employees.

These barriers to VET qualifications may be best addressed through the allocation of a number of the Productivity Program Places for existing workers to the new family relationship services VET qualifications.

Recommendation: Skills Australia advise the Australian Government that family relationship services VET qualifications must be seen as a priority area for new and existing workers and that a number of Productivity Program Places existing workers training places should be allocated to the sector.





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