Capacity challenges for service delivery of marriage and relationship education

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Family relationship services are provided by a range of agencies, many of which operate in partnership with the Australian Government. The Australian Government funds and administers community-based agencies to provide support services to families through the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) but it does not operate directly on the front line. Governments and service providers rely on each other for different resources, particularly as policy making has become more complex and fragmented. First, a dependent partnership exists because service

providers rely on the Government for funds and structural support. In exchange, governments rely on service providers to implement their policies. Second, a partnership exists among the service providers, independent of the Government (van Acker, 2008). In order to provide services most effectively, we need to know how successfully the various players work to utilise available resources and to deliver services.

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This article does three things.

- It outlines some of the challenges for governments and service providers in delivering marriage and relationship education (MRE).
- It provides a sketch of a proposed research project that would conduct interviews with people in the field to gather their views and comments about these issues.
- It invites feedback from the sector about how governments and agencies can address these challenges.

Service delivery challenges: Supply and demand

The Government's capacities to deliver MRE services are contingent on mobilising public and private resources and support. The proposed research project will examine the following factors that influence the capacity to deliver services effectively. The final analysis will suggest some ways of solving the problems.

Supply

Workforce issues

A major service delivery challenge for governments, organisations and practitioners concerns staff recruitment and training. The 2004 review of the wider FRSP highlighted recruitment and retention difficulties. Some agencies rely on volunteers. The workforce consists of low paid workers and many workers who "tend to be middle class women of a certain age" (Urbis Keys Young, 2004, p. 120–122). This may be a problem if the sector wants to

attract younger people, who are in relationships, as potential clients. Moreover, according to anecdotal evidence, there are retention problems because many educators suffer "burn out". Recent attempts to professionalise the MRE sector include the development of competency standards that may assist in improving recruitment.

Allocating funds

The research project will focus on a range of funding concerns. The sector has expanded the range of MRE services since the 1960s. Government interface with the sector is designed to build the capacity of the organisations and to purchase services to deliver to the community. The challenge is that

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providers receive scarce funds that need to cover wages, training, materials and other costs. Moreover, they often see more clients than the funding model calculates, but are not paid for this extra work. Increased funding would undoubtedly make a significant contribution to alleviating some of the service delivery problems. Convincing the Government that this would be money well spent is an additional challenge. This is particularly the case when there is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of MRE. Although research demonstrates that couples benefit from MRE (see Halford & Simons, 2005; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006), more rigorous evaluation of the long-term effects of the programs is required. In turn, this would add costs to the public purse.

Demand

Stakeholders

The research project seeks to discover how governments manage competing demands from a range of educators in different agencies. In fact, policy capacity is dispersed across community, faith-based and not-for-profit organisations with a range of views. Agencies have developed different programs locally to address diverse client demands, learning approaches, skills and training (Halford & Simons, 2005). As such, it may be

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difficult to coordinate these programs and meet diverse clients' needs. A challenging characteristic of MRE—like other areas of service provision—is that no "one size fits all". For example, practitioners may hold conflicting beliefs about the value of the nuclear family and traditional marriage. Individual educators may strongly disagree about issues such as cohabitation, gender equity and same-sex marriage. The research aims to examine the values of service providers and the impact of these values on service

delivery of MRE.

"At risk" groups

Another demand for services relates to "at risk" groups. The research project will consider how to develop resources so that clients with particular needs are accommodated. There are gaps in the provision of programs for Indigenous and migrant groups, step-families, young people, older couples, and people with a mental illness or disability (Simons & Parker, 2002). In addition, MRE may not be a priority for those on low incomes, who may also be faced with housing and other insecurities. Delivering programs on a large scale to rural and remote communities presents further challenges (Catholic Welfare Australia & Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006).

Potential clients

The proposed research project will also address the challenges in targeting potential clients.

- It will examine ways of raising public awareness about the availability and possible benefits of MRE programs. This may create additional pressures for service providers. How can they sell the message that it is useful to learn relationship skills when couples are happy and their relationship is healthy? The focus of MRE is always on the positive in language, attitudes and knowledge, but if couples are "in a good place" they may not see MRE as relevant or useful. Furthermore, potential clients who are ill-informed may perceive MRE as a form of counselling which they do not need. A major challenge is therefore to develop ways of shaping MRE as "normal" and as acceptable as antenatal or parenting classes.
- Improving awareness of services does not automatically result in greater public acceptance or participation in the programs (Parker, 2007).
- The issue of timing is important. Just before their wedding, many couples are caught up in preparations and attending a program might be seen as an added stress and cost that they wish to avoid. After marriage, couples get caught up in domestic life.
- It is not easy for governments to encourage participation in programs that concern emotionally-intense personal decisions, such as marriage (van Acker 2003). Simons, Harris and Willis (1994) found that many people view marriage as none of the government's business—their relationship is private. Therefore, strategies such as skills training and completing questionnaires are perceived as inconvenient and unnecessary. Couples

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may prefer to read self-help books and magazines or search the Internet for resources within the privacy of their home.

The research project intends to examine problems relating to workforce matters, funding, stakeholder demands, "at risk" groups and potential clients and how to address them. It will interview various stakeholders for their views about the challenges they confront and suggestions about how to tackle them. Overall, it will investigate how and whether

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services that aim to build healthy relationships and strong families can "be done better". The research project will take two years, including a literature review, interviews, delivering conference papers and writing journal articles about the findings and analysis.

If you would like to offer your views about the nature of the research project, its methodology, the issues to be addressed, or would like to be interviewed to discuss these matters, please contact Liz van Acker, Department of Politics and Public Policy, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD, 4111. Phone 07 3735 7696; Email: E.vanacker@griffith.edu.au

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