



Conference Evaluation Report

The Inaugural FRSA National Conference 2008 'Collective Wisdom: together we are better' was held in Cairns from 5-7 November. Over 315 people attended the conference over the three days with an average of 290 people attending on each day. Evaluation feedback was provided through written or online survey completed by 160 conference delegates.

Big picture

More than 87% of survey respondents rated the conference 'above average' or 'excellent' overall. Specifically, the following features of the conference were consistently rated highly by the majority of respondents¹:

- Quality of speakers and presenters
- Event schedule over the 2.5 days
- Program mix of plenary/workshop sessions
- Administration and support
- Venue and facilities
- Social events and networking opportunities
- Folder and satchel information
- Value for money



Delegate comments:

"Thanks for a great opportunity to overview the sector and practices within"

"Good mix of big ideas stimulation/international perspective and insight and evaluation of frontline work"

"Really good for first time. Let's build on it"

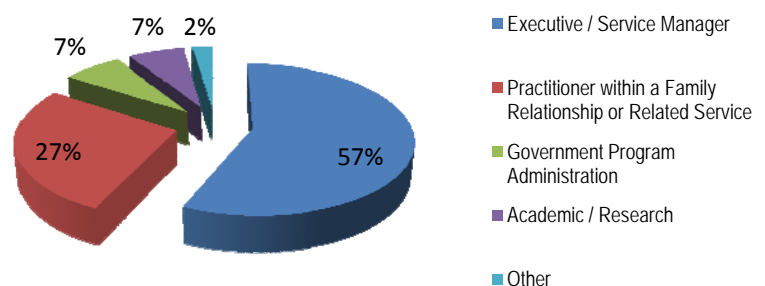
Relevance

In planning this conference FRSA aspired to cater to a diverse mix of delegates including executives, practitioners and administrators engaged in service delivery as well as academics and practitioners from related sectors such as family law. Beyond being an enjoyable networking opportunity this event aimed to be thought provoking, inspiring and useful in a practical sense.

To ascertain if this goal was achieved survey respondents were asked to rate how relevant the conference was to their work. The responses were:

- High (71%)
- Moderate (26%)
- Low (3%)

Survey respondents by work role



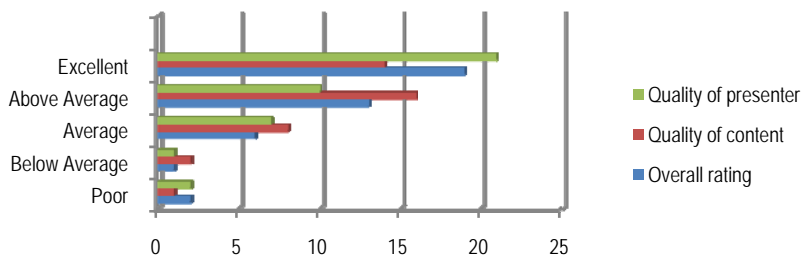
¹ Attracted a score of 'above average' or 'excellent' by more than 80% of survey respondents.

Pre-conference Workshops

Six pre-conference workshops were offered on November 4 the day before the main program commenced. A total of 70 delegates attended one of these workshops and 41 of these completed the evaluation survey.

Overall satisfaction with the quality of the workshops was high as demonstrated in the graph below.

Participant feedback on pre-conference workshops



Keynote/Plenary and Panel Sessions

Many of the respondents commented positively on the mix of speakers and the opportunity to hear different perspectives. Overall, the quality of the keynote and plenary sessions rated highly with 93% of respondents.

Three keynote presenters were rated 'excellent' by the majority of survey respondents:

- Professor Clive Hamilton
- Professor Michael Little
- Leonie Norrington

Delegate comments:

"I found myself wandering back to his talk on several occasions during the week"

"He was outstanding in terms of his content and his ability as a speaker!"

"I could have listened to him all day"

"Inspired and inspiring"

Other popular sessions included:

- *Vision and action steps for achieving a paradigm shift in the way we respond to family separation involving dispute and conflict* – Federal Magistrate Hartnett, Deputy Chief Justice Faulks, Professor Helen Rhoades & Ian Kennedy AM.
- *Community Leaders on Strategic Issues* - Dr Chris Jones, Frank Quinlan & Lin Hatfield Dodds.
- *Perspectives on Social Inclusion* - Dr Bryan Rodgers & Dr Marion Maddox.
- *The Evidence for Father Engagement*, Dr Richard Fletcher.
- Performance by the JUTE Theatre Group.
- *Conference Reflections* by Jo Cavanagh (Family Life), Robyn Fleming (FaHCSIA) and Sue Pidgeon (AGD)

Respondents also commented on the significance of having the Attorney-General open the conference and both the Minister for Human Services the Hon Joe Ludwig and Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion Senator Ursula Stephens address the conference.



Concurrent Sessions

The concurrent sessions that were most popular included:

- *Measuring child wellbeing*, Tim Hobbs.
- *Inter-professional Practice - Family Lawyers & Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners*, Professor Helen Rhoades, Julie Dobinson, Rebecca Eberle and Helen McGowan.
- *Expert Panel on Safety for women and children in family relationship services*, Dr Elspeth McInnes, Lisa Whittaker-Nichols, Zoe Rathus and Professor Thea Brown.
- *Integrated Approaches to Intake and Assessment*, Lil Beamish, Karen Irwin, Karen Field, Helen Rimington, Samantha Aldridge and Natasha Rae
- *Enhancing parenting capacity*, Professor Mary Oliver and Christopher Dole
- *Models of mediation*, Dr Alan Campbell, Professor Thea Brown, Jill Armstrong, Jennie Hannan and Lesley Bracebridge.
- *Post separation parenting and patterns of shared care*, Professor Bryan Rodgers, Associate Professor Dale Bagshaw, Becky Batagol and Zoe Rathus.
- *Culturally responsive practice in Family Dispute Resolution*, Dr Susan Armstrong and Mandy Flahavin.
- *Practitioner consultation and update - evaluation of family law reforms*, Lawrie Maloney and Kelly Hand.



The sessions rated most highly ('excellent') were:

- *'Family connections' a parenting program with a difference*, Fiona McDonald & Michael Sheehan.
- *SNAICC cultural access policy for children's services*, Julian Pocock.
- *Working with stepfamilies*, Daniela Zimmermann
- *Games we play in the third space*, Jill Parris.

Delegate comments:

"A timely challenge to practitioners to re-think what is considered best practice"

"Presentations were interesting and insightful"

"I have already drawn on it twice while working with clients"

Feedback from respondents suggested that overall the concurrent sessions were thought-provoking and interesting. Particular praise was given to those that engaged participants in interactive learning or discourse.

It was suggested that future events allow more time for each speaker in shared sessions. Some also requested fewer sessions and for sessions to be repeated to allow participants to attend more of the options available.



Social Events

An estimated 190 people attended the conference welcome event, of which 95 provided evaluation feedback. Overall 73% rated the event highly. There was some constructive feedback about difficulty seeing performers due to a lack of space – this was in part due to a much higher number of people attending than had been anticipated when the event was being planned. Entertainment was provided by the Balaclava State Primary School choir and the Baiwa Dance Company – a local dance company performing contemporary and traditional dances from the Torres Strait (pictured above).

The Conference Dinner was held at the end of the first day. Attendance was estimated at 272 people of which 134 provided feedback. Overall 62% rated the event highly. Feedback suggests that while many enjoyed the food and atmosphere some participants did not enjoy the 'tropical trivia' entertainment suggesting that it stifled networking and/or that the attire and attitude of the entertainers was inappropriate.

At the end of the second day delegates had the option to attend one of three social networking dinners. The 'Tjapaki' option was rated 'excellent' by the majority who attended, the 'Ocean Spirit Cruise' and 'Donnis Restaurants' options also received positive ratings and feedback.



Highlights and Lowlights

The quality of speakers and presenters was identified by the majority of respondents as a highlight of the conference. Nonetheless, some felt that the program was too full, speakers were rushing and the schedule ran overtime too often. Several participants found it difficult to choose between concurrent sessions and would have liked to attend more of these. Also, more time for questions and interactive engagement would have been desirable.

Participants also identified opportunities to network with other practitioners, reflect on practice and engage in 'fearless and frank' discussions as highlights.

Some felt that too much time was allocated to sessions on government policy without there being new information or ideas to explore. Others felt that there was a lack of opportunity to engage and generate ideas rather than passively receive information.

Some identified gaps in content such as the needs of gay parents, carers and families affected by disability.

There were mixed views on the venue, facilities and catering. Some were disappointed others impressed. Comments in some cases indicated a perception that the venue was expensive compared to alternatives but it was actually competitive with alternatives in Cairns and other locations.

The conference bags received positive feedback, though it was suggested a writing pad would have been good to include.

The conference t-shirts given as a gift to all presenters and worn by volunteers were also very popular.

Finally, the last word goes to the location. The majority of comments on the location of Cairns were very positive – many said that they liked getting away and being in the tropics. Respondents acknowledged that while it added to the cost for participants this was offset by travel subsidies (available for FRSP funded organisations) made possible by sponsorship.

Acknowledgements

Overall this conference was successful because of the hard work and generosity of many, our thanks in particular to:

- Members of the FRSA Conference Reference Group, including the chair Jo Cavanagh;
- FRSA Staff, particularly Bonnie Montgomery and Sue Williams;
- Volunteers – Bill Payne, Alan Williams, Rob Cavanagh; and
- Sponsors – as listed below.



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department
**Department of Families,
Housing, Community Services
and Indigenous Affairs**

Relationships Australia

ANGLICARE
CHANGING LIVES WA



Australian Government
Child Support Agency

 **interrelate**
family centres

 **Catholic Social Services
Australia**



Delegate comments:

"I think next time try not to fit so much in. It would have been better to have more time to ask questions and make the session more interactive."

"The destination and conference facilities combined to create a positive atmosphere in attending something 'special' "

"Great location; it is nice to have a conference somewhere other than Sydney or Melbourne"

