Evidence-based advocacy. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

Brian W Head PhD¹ and Fiona J Stanley, MBBS, MD, DSc (Hon), FAA, AC²

¹Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia and ²Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, West Perth WA, Australia

Abstract: The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was established in 2002 by leading stakeholders from three sectors – research, government policy, and professional practice – concerned to tackle the major issues affecting the wellbeing of Australia’s children and young people. This is a network-based organisation, with major emphasis on collaboration across these three sectors. Strong emphasis is placed on promoting an evidence-based approach, focusing on a manageable number of key topics, building and disseminating the knowledge base, and translating knowledge into positive solutions that have support across these sectors. This network approach is making a difference in attracting support for evidence-based advice about effective early intervention in areas of particular concern for the wellbeing of young people, such as mental health, drugs and alcohol use, juvenile justice, and vocational skills training.

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Correspondence: Professor Brian Head, Director, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, Q.4072, Australia. Email: brianh@aracy.org.au


INTRODUCTION

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was established in 2002. According to its constitution, the purposes of ARACY are “facilitating, coordinating and supporting the development of knowledge through scientific research and the effective use of that knowledge which is or may be of value to Australia by enhancing the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people” (1).

In formal terms, ARACY is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, with deductible-gift status. Funding for initial projects came from philanthropic foundations, business donations, and government grants. It is governed by a high-profile Board of Directors incorporating leaders from business, law, research, and the community sector. ARACY is a national organisation, not a federation of state-based chapters. It has offices in three cities, which administer various aspects of the day-to-day operations of the organisation. The CEO is based in Canberra, while national program coordination and the executive director are based in Perth. The coordinator of the “Future Generation” Research Network is based in Melbourne. Organisations and individuals may join ARACY – in early 2007 there were about 300 organisational members and several hundred individual members. The largest grouping of organisations comes from professional practice communities, followed by research centres and government policy agencies.

The establishment of ARACY followed a series of meetings among leading...
stakeholders from three sectors—research, policy and professional practice—who were concerned to promote new and more effective ways of tackling the complex and inter-related issues affecting the wellbeing of Australia’s children and young people. Many of these problems, described elsewhere in this Symposium, require collective approaches and new thinking. ARACY’s founders believed that the benefits of developmental and prevention approaches were not being realised. They believed that major issues could be successfully addressed only through more ambitious approaches, with a sound knowledge-base and effective collaborative processes. The rationale for this new approach was outlined in a number of reports, presentations and books (2–6). Consultation on the best models to adopt was undertaken with key international stakeholders—including both outstanding research scholars, and innovative interdisciplinary organisations, promoting links between research, policy and practice.

The new Alliance committed itself to an ambitious set of ongoing functions (1), including:

- develop an innovative and strategic research agenda
- document problems in health, education, behaviour and crime
- improve understanding of complex causal pathways
- facilitate consensus between researchers, policy makers and practitioners about research priorities, gaps in knowledge, and implications of research findings for effective interventions
- broker new research collaborations to address identified priorities
- provide infrastructure and inter-sectoral networks to facilitate research and to facilitate the application of evidence-based knowledge
- establish a major national data and information capacity
- establish a clearinghouse to identify cost effective interventions
- disseminate research knowledge in an accessible form so that it can be better utilised by policy makers and practitioners
- influence policies and programs implemented by State and Commonwealth agencies, community groups and others.

Achievement of bold objectives for children and youth inevitably takes time. ARACY, as a new organisation, had to spend considerable early effort in finalising its governance structure and consulting on initial projects. These tasks may have frustrated some stakeholders who were looking for rapid results or direct involvement in a wider range of projects. As more projects have been endorsed, specific collaborative methodologies (meetings, teams, reference groups, expressions of interest) have been implemented to expand the voice of network participants and provide a wider range of opportunities for involvement. While it is unlikely that many members have a primary interest in governance and direction processes, there is widespread interest in ensuring high quality projects around key issues with participation across sectors of expertise.

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

By its nature, a broad Alliance must make choices about areas of focus and impact. One of the first tasks was to commission a consensus process for national priorities. An extensive consultation process involving about 400 people was commissioned, drawing on the three sectors of expertise—policy, practice and research. This produced a lengthy list of important topics and approaches (7). A process of further
filtering led in 2005 to an initial list of four broad topics for the work program – vulnerable children and youth (mitigating the effects of poverty and disadvantage, preventing and protecting against abuse and neglect), transitions (more effective pathways into and out of schooling), and relationships for a child/youth-friendly society. A cross-cutting theme is the involvement of young people in discussion and decision-making on matters affecting their wellbeing. These topics have set the pattern for workshop events, conference themes, and cross-sectoral forums for the exchange of perspectives between policy, research and practice.

At the same time, increasing attention was given to ensuring that youth issues were not unduly displaced by the high-profile debates on early childhood development, which had legitimately attracted considerable policy attention and investment in recent years. Nearly 20% of the Australian population are aged between 12 and 24 years, but relatively less policy effort has been mobilised to address the specific needs of young people (8). One of the key international proponents of early childhood investment, Professor Deborah Phillips (9), recently noted that while the focus on young children has been commendable, the issues and needs of adolescents and young people have drifted away from the attention of governments. She pointed out that development, whether neurological or social, does not simply stop in childhood, and that it is a continuing process throughout adolescence and young adulthood (10). Specific and appropriate interventions and prevention programs are thus essential for adolescents, rather than relying on services developed for younger children or for adults.

This is why ARACY in 2006 commenced a major consultation process to raise the profile of youth issues and to cooperatively develop a National Youth Agenda through a broad consultative process. ARACY created a list of around 80 organisations with a special interest in youth services and policy, across many disciplines, and across the policy, research and practice divides. A modified ‘Delphi’ process was used to develop an integrated list of issues, which was commented upon in further rounds of consultation. The final priorities will be provided to governments, service providers and researchers, and will also become the focus of specialised workshops, during 2007. Examples of focus areas include mental health, drugs and alcohol use, juvenile justice, and vocational skills training. ARACY is also releasing a set of principles (the ‘Statement of Commitment’) underlining the value of young people in Australian society, and associated communications resources will be developed for use by member organisations in shaping their own key messages about the development and protection of young people.

Strategic priorities for youth policy and programs are also impacted by major forums such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The reform agenda adopted by the Prime Minister and Premiers in July 2006 focussed on “human capital” issues (especially health, learning and work outcomes) as well as the more typical issues of economic efficiency and business regulation. Some relevant areas selected for attention include the proportion of young people meeting physical health standards (nutrition, exercise, non-smoking), meeting basic numeracy and literacy standards, and the proportion of young people making a smooth transition from school to work or further study (11). ARACY conducted a forum for about thirty non-government organisations (NGOs) in December 2006 in
order to explore ways in which NGOs can contribute to the further development of these “human capital” issues, and to explore the potential for cross-sector input and cooperative effort in advancing the proposed initiatives. Participants in the forum were invited to consider how their organisation could contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the COAG National Reform Agenda. Sub-groups considered each of the human capital priority areas and made a number of recommendations for future action by NGOs. The concluding session focused on the opportunities for collaborative action among NGOs to frame common messages and to influence strategies on key issues.

BUILDING NETWORK CAPACITY FOR COLLABORATION
The vision of ARACY is based on an understanding that many of the problems confronting the wellbeing of many of Australia’s young are complex and entrenched, and beyond the capacity of any single organisation or individual working alone. Solutions are likely to come from organisations working together and sharing information, ideas and resources. It is often the case that good research is available, but it is not getting to where it could make a difference. The reasons for poor utilisation of research are complex and varied and include the traditional divides between sectors, disciplines and jurisdictions. A “clearinghouse” website will provide documentation of effective interventions in a variety of formats suited for policy, research and practice audiences. This material will help strengthen communities by providing ready access to information and promoting local program and service evaluations. The key focus of ARACY is on applied solution-focussed knowledge and getting evidence into action. The operating philosophy of ARACY’s “Future Generation” Research Network, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), has been harnessed to this approach. Unlike conventional research, the seed-funding allocated within ARACY’s Research Network projects is made available only for cross-sectoral and problem-oriented teams (12). The insistence on collaborative approaches is a hallmark of ARACY operations.

ARACY will assist in unlocking the potential of the national research infrastructure, by improving access to the vast information held in various agencies and organisations. The Alliance has been instrumental in working to create a national data network (NDN), linking the social and health population databases and cohort studies which are currently dispersed in agencies and centres across the country. The NDN will develop a child and youth information “portal”. This facility is now hosted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (13). Harnessing this wealth of information through a national data network will allow proper monitoring and mapping to take place and make it possible to better evaluate policies and strategies. Drawing on information obtained through the data network, economic analysis can assist in demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of various policy investments.

An understanding of the purpose and operating style of ARACY is important for minimising misunderstanding among members and potential partnering organisations. For example, many organisations share some aspects of the same vision concerning the wellbeing of young Australians. But what sets ARACY apart from others is:

- The involvement of researchers, policy makers and practitioners at every level of discussion and decision-making
The extent to which the approach is genuinely multidisciplinary. Few organisations are as broad in their view of what it takes to be multidisciplinary

- The reach and depth of potential expertise that can be brought to the table in addressing problems
- National collaborations and perspectives, designed for the long haul (as against regional, state-based or short-term collaborative ventures or projects)
- Professional expertise of the membership and the standing they bring
- Focus on communication of findings and ideas for active improvements
- Emphasis both on innovation and on building on what already exists
- Commitment to being inclusive and ensuring no single perspective dominates.

The network model is facilitative rather than directive. ARACY must act as a catalyst to activate network members to work on important issues, recognising that success ultimately depends on the network itself. ARACY has set itself a role in “brokering collaborations.” Ideally, its function is to create and facilitate the environment of innovative dialogue that allows the strongest ideas to gain currency and ultimately funding support. However, stakeholders may have differing interpretations reflecting their history of involvement with the organisation, their familiarity with its aims and structure, and their personal experiences, needs and interests. ARACY cannot be all things to all people, as illustrated in Table 1.

COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY
The objectives of ARACY require an intensive and extensive focus on communication. Managing and disseminating knowledge is vital to the mission. However, there are many players and many audiences. ARACY thus needs to respond to, and influence, a wide range of stakeholders. Because ARACY is a network drawing upon the expertise of many diverse sectors and disciplines, it is difficult to develop a consensus position on many issues. Thus, the network has to facilitate a balanced view. On particular matters of policy significance, there could be a spectrum of relevant approaches, ranging from facilitation to advocacy – e.g., ARACY fostering dialogue among diverse experts to broaden the extent of common ground, through to ARACY adopting a sharper and more definitive view on specific proposals which could then be marketed in the policy arena. Generally speaking, ARACY is wary of “speaking” on behalf of member-organisations, and more commonly provides the forums and interactive resources for groups to develop better-informed joint proposals. The approach requires the involvement of decision-makers in the process of “owning” both the nature of the problem and the most effective solutions.

ARACY’s communications strategy is based on the need to promote links between institutions, organisations and other groups concerned with the wellbeing of Australia’s children and young people, making it easier to develop new partnerships and identify expertise and resources. ARACY’s mission requires assisting the development of effective communication across disciplines to harness expertise and resources, adding value to existing research by translating findings into user-friendly forms, and encouraging the development of a culture of evidence-based decision making at policy and practice levels. The development of the “clearinghouse” website is intended to encourage the dissemination of knowledge transfer and knowledge utilisation.
Table 1. Features of ARACY

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What ARACY is</th>
<th>What ARACY is not</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National entity</td>
<td>State based organisations seeking a national focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network of research, policy and practice</td>
<td>Research network only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary, cross-sectorial and cross-jurisdictional</td>
<td>Focused on or dominated by a particular interest, sector or jurisdiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focused on finding practical evidence-based solutions to strategic issues</td>
<td>Undertaking primary, descriptive or specific research in the name of ARACY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broker of novel collaborations (i.e. not done before), involving research, policy and practice</td>
<td>Continuing the existing silos and styles in research or evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working through and with partner organisations</td>
<td>Competing with existing collaborations or partnerships</td>
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<td>Primarily an organisation of organisations (a “super-network”) which can commit organisational resources to and sustain collaborative effort</td>
<td>An organisation of individuals reliant on seeking permission and resources from their various employers; or alternatively being reliant on direct funding from ARACY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitator/enabler of collaborative effort with a variety of leadership roles</td>
<td>Director of collaborations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitator and disseminator of new approaches to relevant knowledge</td>
<td>Research funding organisation</td>
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<td>Focused on the developmental life-span (from conception to young adulthood)</td>
<td>Focused on a life period (e.g. age cohort focus on 0-6, or 14-18, etc)</td>
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ARACY has an opportunity to articulate a coherent vision for the wellbeing of children and young people to government, philanthropic and corporate supporters, and to advocate for the wellbeing of young Australians to be central to policy making at all levels of government. More broadly, ARACY has a responsibility to contribute to educating and informing the broader community about adverse trends affecting the life chances of children and young people and what is needed to turn these around. Finally, ARACY has a special role in advocating for the participation of young people in the processes for decision-making about matters that affect their wellbeing. In conjunction with the state-based Commissioners for Children and Young People, ARACY has strongly supported activities to enable young people to exercise their right to be heard on matters affecting their interests.

NETWORK-BASED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

For ARACY to "broker" collaborations and to create incentives for development of collaborative skills among stakeholders, it must function with an entrepreneurial organisational style, in particular that of "social entrepreneurs." This suggests that ARACY must pursue opportunities by bringing to bear resources controlled by others – governmental, philanthropic, academic, and other partners.
This social entrepreneurship approach well describes ARACY (14). The traditional research model has not resolved longstanding problems affecting the well-being of children. ARACY’s mission addresses both ends of the problems – improved understanding of causes and potential solutions, and improved application of knowledge into action. The ARACY model of change through a collaborative, cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral approach may be “risky” in conventional terms, but this is acceptable risk if nothing else has the prospect of succeeding quickly.

This social entrepreneurship approach also hinges on another network aspect: the priority of networking as the means for ARACY to attract the dispersed resources controlled by others that allow it to achieve its mission. Networking – with leading players in the far-flung communities of government, research, social service, philanthropy, in Australia and beyond – is the essential activity that must be facilitated by ARACY’s leadership and organisational support.

CONCLUSION – FROM KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION
Australia’s leading child and youth-focused organisations established the Alliance to bring about a significant improvement in the health and wellbeing of children and young people through a new model of collaboration. Diverse expertise is being brought together and given unprecedented access to relevant information and experience in the mission to identify effective early interventions. Policymakers and service providers will work with researchers at every point, from framing research questions to communicating findings. This will ensure that knowledge can be put into practice at every level, from macro policy to local service delivery.

ARACY will broker multidisciplinary collaborations (e.g. health, education, social science, economics, law) where the accumulated wisdom of policymakers and practitioners can be taken up by researchers. As an organisation-of-organisations, or a “super-network”, the Alliance can draw on a range of willing partners who recognise that the problems experienced by young Australians are too complex and entrenched for the piecemeal solutions that come from old ways of working.

ARACY and its member organisations are developing and extending the frameworks for effective early intervention strategies, both for children and young people. Prevention sciences have provided compelling evidence that while the causal pathways to disorders, diseases and other problems may vary, many have common beginnings. ARACY will promote pathways research to map these common beginnings and identify the key points at which intervention will yield optimum outcomes. Using this framework, policy options can then be generated and modelled. The Alliance will continue to seek consensus on future action and research priorities, in order to focus effort and investment in areas that will yield the greatest impact.

Better knowledge needs to be translated into action. ARACY will work with stakeholders to promote translating research into the most useful form for policymakers and service providers, conducting workshops and roundtables to stimulate interest and producing web-based and hard copy documents tailored to specific audiences. A national collaborative enterprise such as this is unparalleled in Australian social policy. It will provide access to the best information and thinking in this country and the assurance of connections to international networks.
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