THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

REDESIGN OF THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES
AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

SUBMISSION BY:

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We appreciate this opportunity to respond to the *Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS).* We do so as University of Sydney academics who have conducted research on intercountry adoption, in collaboration with colleagues from the National Taiwan University (NTU), Taipei. This research involved us collecting data on the experience of adult adoptees and adoptive parents on their connection to family and to Taiwan (as the country of origin). Our NTU colleagues collected data on the experiences of mothers who relinquished children for intercountry adoption. Both research teams interviewed professionals involved with intercountry adoption in our respective countries. Comments in this submission draw on our research, and written findings can be provided upon request (these are in the process of being published in peer reviewed journals).

One of the significant findings of our research, which is supported by the current literature, is that adoption is a lifelong process with issues emerging at different points in time; for example, particularly around life stages such as adolescence, when identity needs become more prominent, and significant life events, such as becoming a parent.

The current approach to intercountry adoption does not reflect this reality, rather it is largely transactional and support services are generally crisis driven. Government support emphasises the process of applying for, becoming approved, and having a child placed with an adoptive family. After a brief period of follow up in the first year of placement, government support is largely withdrawn, with the exception of Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS). Because ICAFSS has an emphasis on casework and counselling, it has a largely reactive emphasis on issues that emerge for adoptees and their families. Yet the research on adoption suggests that there are normative needs for adopted people, around forming their identities and developing an understanding of their life stories. This suggests the value of proactive services that offer support for identity formation, which would include connecting to peers who have shared experiences of adoption, education for adoptive families about adoption-related needs, and support for connecting to family and country of origin. In particular, our research has brought to the fore two issues that we expand on this submission: 1) preparation for racism and 2) support for ethnic identity and connection to family and county of origin.

A striking finding from our data, from interviews with Taiwanese adult adoptees, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged adults in their 50s, nearly all commented that they had experienced racism. Often these are the subtle forms of racism manifest in misrecognition, including being routinely questioned 'where are you from?'. Despite having an Australian accent, adult adoptees noted that this was a frequent question put to them, asking them to account for how they fit in as an 'Australian' when they look 'Asian'. For these Taiwanese adoptees growing up with predominately white Anglo Australian parents means their Asian ethnic identity and adoptive status is evident and not be concealed. Some adoptees in our sample commented that they did not share about these experiences of racism with their parents. Rather than the onus being on the adopted person to manage such encounters, it is important for adoptive parents to be supported to know how to foster an environment open to conversations about race and identity. Adoptive parents therefore need education, as well as peer support from other adoptive parents, to encourage reflection, conversation and awareness about countering racism and fostering positive ethnic identities.

The primary focus of our research is about connection in the context of intercountry adoption. While open adoption, involving face-to-face visitation, is the expectation for any domestic adoption (local adoptions or adoptions from out-of-home care), open adoption has not yet become a standard practice in intercountry adoption. This double standard is a concern. While there are additional challenges to facilitate openness in intercountry adoption, in terms of language, culture and distance, the underlying reasons for openness are the same in the domestic and intercountry contexts. Open adoption can facilitate identity formation, by providing information about the adoptee's life story. Where children are being raised in families who do not share their cultural identity, open adoption can promote cultural understanding and identity. Open adoption can also enable relationships between children's families.

The use of the term 'connection' to family of origin is recommended rather than 'reunion,' which implies a break in the relationship. In our participant group, the majority of adult adoptees had an interest in the possibility of connection, as did their adoptive parents. Yet building these relationships needs to be done in ways that are sensitive to the needs of all parties. For mothers whose children have been adopted, there may be issues of stigma, secrecy and shame, pointing for the need for support on both sides of intercountry adoption to develop connection. Significantly, some adoptive parents and adoptees had maintained a relationship with birth families from the point of adoption. Forms of connection could vary over time – sometimes connection by information exchange in early years, changing later to more direct connection including face-to-face visits when the child and birth family were ready.

Maintaining a connection to the country of origin is also significant. As adults, adoptees may choose to spend time in their country of origin. Adoptive families can support this by encouraging language fluency. Some adoptive parents in our participant group participated in language study as a family, making the adoptees' birth language part of the family's culture. There were also a few families who had maintained their child's passport so that they retained citizenship in their country of origin. Families can also support connection to culture of origin by forming meaningful relationships with people from that culture, who may serve as cultural mentors for the adoptive person. These relationships may come about in the context of community settings such as schools, churches, playgroups and other community groups. Peer relationships with other families who have adopted children from the same country can also encourage efforts towards cultural connection.

We make the following recommendations for the possible redesign of ICAFSS:

- Develop training resources on adoption issues, which could include an adaptation of the U.S. Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) training. This training could be offered to mental health professionals through the Australian Association of Social Work and the Australian Clinical Psychology Association, increasing the availability of adoption-competent mental health professionals. The current ICAFSS telephone counselling service could then refer to these specialists.

- Establish collaborative partnerships with sending countries, to provide resources and assistance for return visit. Adoptees are likely to need logistical support for searching for their families of origin, interpreters and translation, and support for building their

relationship, including being able to talk to people in the country of origin about cultural issues like stigma and secrecy that may affect the process of relationship development.

- Provide seed funding for a travel fund to which adoptees could apply for grants to return to their country of origin. Alternatively, engage the intercounty adoption community in a fundraising event to raise seed funding, which would also promote community awareness. See the 'Gift of Identity' fund as an example of how to administer this type of grant program: http://gift-of-identity.org

- Connect intercountry adoptees with each other and with cultural communities. Build and maintain online information and social media network for intercountry adopted persons and their families. ICAFSS can develop relationships with in-country cultural groups to facilitate opportunities for adopted persons and adoptive families to be included in cultural events and make referrals to current and newly adoptive families. ICAFSS could also maintain a registry of intercountry adoptions, to issue annual or bi-annual surveys to assess whether services are currently meeting needs and engage in continuous quality improvement to ensure the needs of the intercountry adoption community are met.

In closing, we commend the Department of Social Services for redesigning ICAFSS, and particularly for taking into account the lived experiences of adopted people. In our submission, we also have attempted to amplify the voices of those who participated in our research and to encourage new ways of approaching support for adoptees and their families, challenging the assumption of adoption as transactional and instead seeing it as a lifelong relationship and reconsidering reactive services for an approach that normalises the unique family needs associated with adoption. If we can provide any additional information or clarification of the points we have raised, please contact Amy by email at amy.conleywright@sydney.edu.au or by phone at 02 8627 6119.