



Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS) Review

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Acknowledgments

I, Rose Zwiers, am currently studying a dual degree of Social Work and Criminology at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). I conducted this Review of International Social Service (ISS) Australia's Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service while I was on my social work placement at ISS Australia.

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Introduction

On 1 July 2016 International Social Service (ISS) Australia received Commonwealth Government funding for one year from the Department of Social Services (DSS) to establish and deliver the Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS). This service was set up in response to a tender which was released for an Intercountry Adoption Family Support Program in September 2015. ISS Australia had been successful in their tender to deliver the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS) with lead partner LifeWorks and this service became operational in April 2016.

ISS Australia believed this new ICA service failed to meet one of the most important and common needs for Australian intercountry adoptees, that is to provide specialist overseas tracing and family reunification support services. ISS Australia wrote to DSS in September 2015 requesting funding be provided to establish a specialised ICA tracing service. After a series of meetings with DSS, ISS Australia was thrilled to receive DSS funding on 1 July 2016 to deliver ICATRS, and the service became fully operational on 1 September 2016 following recruitment and training of new staff. Due to the successful uptake and high volume of enquiries and cases, ISS Australia were provided with an additional one year of funding on 1 July 2017.

ICATRS provides information, support and counselling to intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents in relation to their decision to trace birth family overseas, but primarily provides support with facilitating the tracing process overseas. ISS Australia uses the resources of the ISS international network and other reputable overseas searching partners to facilitate the tracing of birth family and any other information relevant to the adoptees' birth history and identity.

This review was conducted in two parts between February 2018 and May 2018. The purpose of this review was to provide ISS Australia with a snapshot of their clients' engagement and satisfaction with ICATRS. Part A was carried out between February and March 2018 via collating case data, and conducting and analysing client surveys. Overall, the findings indicated the service had a very positive impact on both adult intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents searching on behalf of their child. Furthermore, the majority of respondents reported they were very satisfied to extremely satisfied with the delivery of ICATRS, and nearly all respondents would recommend this service and indicated an indispensable need for the service to continue operating.

Part A of the report was submitted to DSS at the end of March 2018. Part B was carried out between March and May 2018 through conducting and analysing client interviews. The analysis of the interviews supported the findings from the surveys and further highlighted that ICATRS addressed an enormous gap in post placement services available to intercountry adoptees.

Demand Data

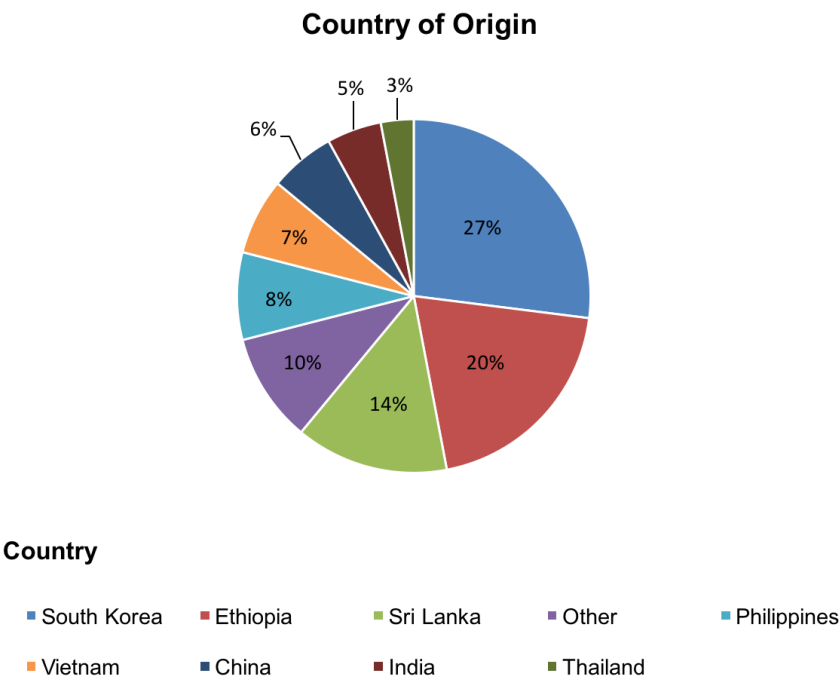
ICATRS experiences a high level of demand from Australian intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents searching on behalf of their child. In the 12 months between April 2017 and March 2018, 120 new cases were opened in addition to the initial 106 cases opened between September 2016 and March 2017, equating to a total of 226 new cases in less than two years. The number of referrals and enquiries to ICATRS have been consistently high despite the absence of any formal promotion of the service, indicating there is a high demand for intercountry adoption tracing support and services. The number of cases opened each year greatly surpassed the initial prediction of 60 cases per annum.

Individual intercountry adoption tracing cases require different amounts of time and effort to complete, depending on the information available and difficulties encountered during the search. In less than two years of operation, ICATRS has successfully traced 55 birth families, and has facilitated 28 reunions for its clients. Due to the lengthy and often arduous process of accessing records and working with partners overseas, many of the cases from ICATRS' inaugural year remain open and still form part of the workload for staff, in addition to the opening of new cases in 2017/18. The outcomes met by the service to date have been remarkable considering the lengthy duration of cases.

State/Territory breakdown: (September 2016- March 2018)

State/Territory	Number of Cases
VIC	64
NSW	60
QLD	23
SA	21
WA	27
TAS	5
ACT	2
NT	7
Overseas	17
Total Cases	226

Country of origin breakdown: (September 2016- March 2018)



The majority of clients were born in South Korea, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. The countries featured in the 'other' category include: Fiji, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Serbia, Romania and Malaysia and there were between 1 and 3 clients who originated from each of those countries.

Adult Adoptee and Adoptive Family breakdown: (September 2016 - March 2018)

Of all cases, 53% of clients were adult adoptees and 41% were adoptive parents searching for birth family on behalf of their adopted child. Furthermore, 6% were birth family members from the adopted person's country of origin searching for their child in Australia.

Literature Review

While there is limited literature available on the Australian intercountry adoption context, the current literature in the adoption field has highlighted the impact of historical events, past and present policies, culture and Australia's societal structure in the field of intercountry adoption. During the 1970s Australia played a large role in accepting children from both Vietnam and Korea during national wars and thousands of children were sent to Australia, North America and Europe via Operation Babylift during the Vietnam War. At the time, this was seen as a humanitarian operation, however the children often had families back in Vietnam who had placed them in the orphanages on a temporary basis and were expecting their children to return to them post war (Fronek 2012: 448). In addition, the children were airlifted in a rush due to the fall of Saigon and therefore there were many issues in relation to documentation (record destruction, falsified records, lost information etc.). This meant majority of children were sent to Australia with no links to their family or culture (Fronek 2012: 449) and very little hope of being able to locate them in the future.

Australia's first adoption program with South Korea officially began in 1977. This was set up in response to the declining number of children available for adoption in Australia. Local adoptions were becoming less common as single parent welfare payments were introduced in Australia in 1973. At the same time; the White Australia Policy was abolished, the term 'multiculturalism' was introduced and as a result Asian migration increased. These events changed society's attitudes towards supporting intercountry adoption (Fronek 2012: 452). Between 1987 and 2012 the number of intercountry adoptions decreased by 78%, as it had also become increasingly possible for families to keep their children in developing countries (Riggs and Due 2015: 276). Current adoption trends illustrate that there was a continuing decline in intercountry adoptions and a decrease in the median processing time (from 41 to 33 months) in the last financial year (2016-2017) from 2015-16 (AIHW 2016: Table OV1 and Table PT1). Australia promotes adoption programs in countries which are compliant with The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (Riggs and Due 2015: 276). The purpose of The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption is to protect children from trafficking and assure that adoption only occurs in the best interests of the child. Therefore, it is surprising that the majority (55%) of intercountry adoptions that were finalised between 2016-17 were Non-Hague country adoptions (AIHW 2017: 17). As a result, Australia has been criticised for not advocating for improvements to human rights and social justice in sending countries (Fronek and Cuthbert 2013: 409).

Information about an intercountry adoptees country of origin, birth family and their cultural background is essential for the development of their identity. Intercountry adoptees should have a right to this information and this knowledge should be conveyed early on to a child (Ferreira 2014: 7). Furthermore, the adoptive family's attitude and commitment to embracing the birth culture of the child is a key factor in assisting intercountry adoptees to develop a positive sense of self (Scarvelis et al. 2017: 424). These concepts have been enforced through the open model of local adoption practiced throughout Australia however have not been applied to intercountry adoption (Ferreira 2014: 2). In addition, the trauma and grief experienced by intercountry adoptees is 'felt both about the loss of immediate family connections as well as not feeling that they belong to the history, culture and story of the adoptive family' (Clare 2014: 1). Selman (2012) acknowledges that intercountry adoptees often struggle with being racially different (Selman 2012 in Scarvelis et al. 2017: 424), as their physical appearance makes them stand out as a minority group in Australia, and at the same time they face rejection from individuals from their country of origin due to 'an inability to speak the language or have a deep understanding of the culture' (Willing 2005 and Willing et al. 2012 in Scarvelis et al. 2017: 424), leading to a rejection of their country of origin identity (Scarvelis et al. 2017: 424).

Support for intercountry adoptees and their families is essential throughout the lifespan, especially post placement. Intercountry adoptees have ongoing needs which arise throughout their life time as they mature from children into adolescents and adults. These needs have a tendency to stem from experiences of early trauma, including abuse and deprivation in orphanages and the experience of racism while growing up (Scarvelis et al. 2017: 431-432). Scarvelis et al. (2017) conducted research similar to this review and interviewed 12 adult intercountry adoptees who were adopted from the Rangsit Children's Home in Thailand to South Australia between the 1980s - 1990s. The participants were aged between 4 and 10 years when they arrived in Australia and consequently indicated that their experience of leaving the home was very confusing, as it was the only place they knew. Scarvelis et al. (2017) concluded it is essential for adoptive parents to have access to resources and education in relation to the challenges they may face when adopting a child from overseas (e.g. emotional and behavioural challenges). This is due to the adoptive parents of the participants not having access to appropriate resources when raising their adoptive children, which had a negative impact on the experiences of intercountry adoptees growing up in Australia (Scarvelis et al. 2017: 431-432).

Methodology

A client survey was conducted between 12 February 2018 and 12 March 2018. This was done by inviting ICATRS clients to complete a short online survey via Survey Monkey (See Appendix I Survey Invitation and Appendix II Survey Questions). 166 survey links were sent to clients, which resulted in 64 clients completing the survey. This is a high response rate of 39%. The respondents consisted of 27 Adult Adoptees and 34 Adoptive Parents searching on behalf of their child. 16 out of the 64 respondents indicated they would be interested in a follow-up interview to discuss in more detail their experience with ICATRS. All 16 respondents were invited to participate in a follow-up interview, however only 6 clients were interviewed. The further 10 respondent's availability changed or there was no response to the email invite or follow up emails. These interviews were conducted in April 2018 and the respondents to the interviews consisted of 2 adult adoptees and 4 adoptive parents.

All participants provided informed consent to participate in the survey and interviews. Quotes from the surveys and interviews were de-identified to ensure the anonymity of the participants (see Appendix III Interview Information Sheet and Appendix IV Interview Consent Form), this included removing any names and countries of origin. Quotes from the interviews (Part B) were identified with 'Adoptive Parent' or 'Adult Adoptee' and labelled from 1-4 and 1-2 respectively. Quotes from the surveys (Part A) could not be identified and labelled as survey responses were anonymous.

Interviews were audio recorded utilizing Garage band (2), Tape a Call (3) and Skype Recorder (1). These three mediums were utilised to record the interviews as two interviews were conducted face to face, three interviews were conducted over the phone (within Australia) and one interview was conducted over skype as the participant was living overseas. The interviews were transcribed, coded and themes were formed.

Part A: Survey Findings

Reasons Behind Tracing

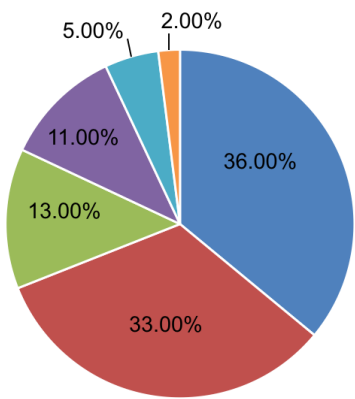
The majority of respondents indicated they had a natural curiosity to trace (33%), which is what prompted them to begin their search. In addition, 36% of respondents indicated that they had an ‘other’ reason to start tracing, although these reasons were similar to those outlined in the survey and mostly related to identity issues and children asking questions about their birth family. For example:

“Identity issues and longing to find parents.”

“I have always had a longing to know and find out. I came with memories and I came with a language. When you are forced to forget, that makes it very difficult. I lost my identity so I am trying to reclaim it.”

“I do not have a strong sense of family...I have no children of my own though not from lack of trying... and my partner encouraged me to try at least to find my biological family. It would also be nice to see myself in someone else. I guess also to try and ... find some sense of closure. There are many other reasons that I struggle to put into words.”

Reasons Behind Decision to Trace



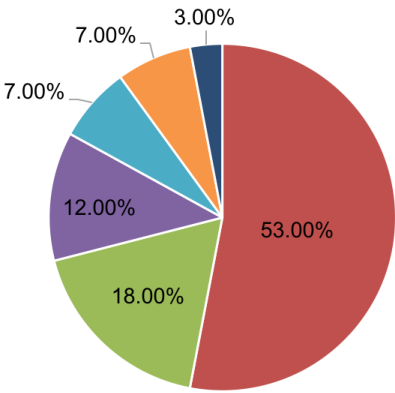
Reasons

- Other (please specify)
- Natural curiosity to trace
- Your child is asking questions about their adoption
- Identity issues
- Your child is displaying signs of grief and loss associated with their adoption
- Major life event (i.e. medical issue, marriage, birth of child, divorce, death of parent)

Stage of the Tracing Process

At the time the survey was conducted the majority of respondents had commenced a search for biological family overseas (53%). To date, biological family members have been located overseas for 18% of respondents. 3% of respondents have undertaken DNA tests to confirm biological relationships and 7% have had a reunion with birth family. In addition, 7% of respondents are still in the early enquiry stage.

Tracing Process Stage



Stages

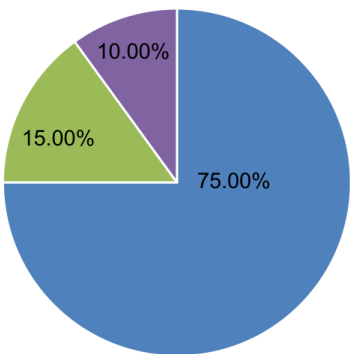
- A request for information and/or a trace for birth family overseas has commenced
- Biological family members have been located overseas
- Had initial meeting/discussion with ISS Australia Social Worker
- Early enquiry stage
- Contact or a reunion has occurred with a biological family member overseas
- DNA tests have been undertaken to confirm biological relationships

Impact of Service

The majority of respondents indicated the service had a positive impact on their overall wellbeing (75%). In addition, no respondents indicated the service had a negative impact on their overall wellbeing.

These results indicate the service had a positive impact on the respondents regardless of what stage of the tracing process they are at. Once biological family members were located overseas, all of the respondents indicated the tracing process had a positive impact on them. Furthermore, only 15 respondents indicated they were unsure of the impact of the service or that the service had no impact on their overall wellbeing. These respondents were in the beginning stages of the tracing process.

Impact of Service on Wellbeing



Impact

- Positive impact
- Negative impact
- No impact
- Unsure

Respondents indicated the service had a positive impact on their overall wellbeing noting that with the help of ISS Australia they were able to access further information about where they were born and potentially about their biological family. This includes, with the assistance of ISS Australia, being able to go overseas to explore their culture and background:

“You helped me trace my orphanage, original date of birth, and many more things that boosted my confidence.”

“If it had not been for ISS, I would have not been able to go to [Country of origin]... I think the fact that they are willing to extend themselves and the fact that they were willing to send someone with me at all- was important. If ISS had refused- then the whole trip would not have been able to go ahead.”

Furthermore, adopted parents searching on behalf of their child felt more prepared to answer questions raised by their children as well as increased confidence to form a discussion with their child about the child’s background:

“Generated involvement from adopted teenager who had previously been reluctant to discuss any adoption related issues. Parents and teenager felt supported and well prepared for recent homeland visit and subsequent return.”

“We feel better knowing we have tried to find information for him if ever he asks or enquires after his background. Occasionally he has asked questions and it would be nice to answer these for him rather than generalise.”

Lastly, respondents indicated the service improved their wellbeing:

“ISS has looked after me and taken the stress out of a very difficult process.”

The respondents who gave a reason as to why the service had no impact on their wellbeing, indicated this was because:

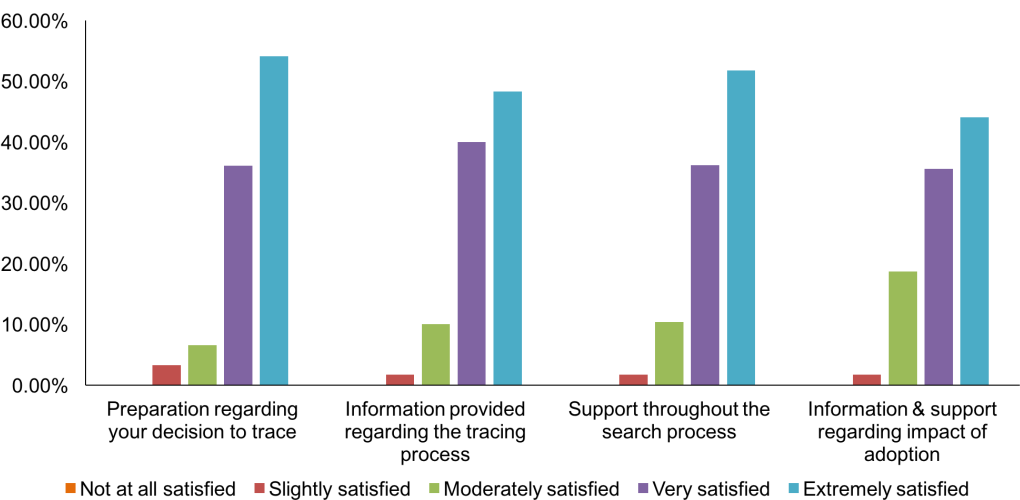
“There are inherent issues with adoption search and tracing that may not necessarily impact someone positively regardless of how good the service provided is.”

“Nothing has changed. Unfortunately no information forthcoming. We kind of expected no results from the search.”

Satisfaction with Service

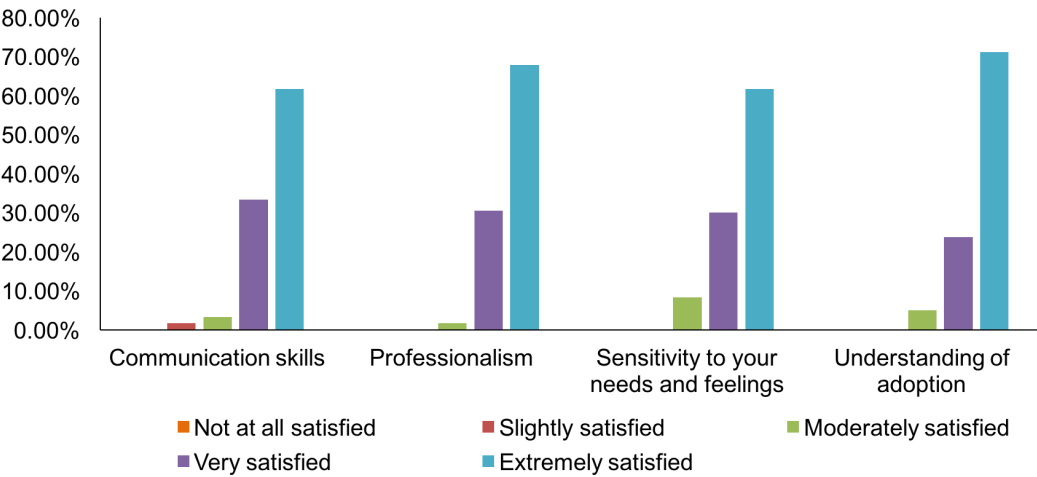
The respondents’ satisfaction rating of the service was very high, across all stages of tracing and the capability of each respondent’s Social Worker. According to the survey, 80% of respondents were very satisfied to extremely satisfied with the service delivery of ICATRS.

Satisfaction with service delivery



In addition, 95% of respondents indicated they were very satisfied to extremely satisfied with their Social Worker.

Satisfaction with social worker



Respondents spoke overwhelmingly of their satisfaction with the outcomes and operation of ICATRS. Respondents cited the ICATRS Social Workers’ capacity to conduct tracing searches through ISS Australia’s international network members or overseas searching partner, as well as their commitment to prioritising and providing informed guidance to the respondents’ emotional needs, as the main factors which contributed to an improved understanding of their personal journey of adoption. This is illustrated through the following response:

“My Social Worker has been brilliant. She has been very prompt in replying to my requests, made herself available when it suited me. She is very understanding and has explained the process very well. I feel completely at ease when speaking with her. I could not recommend this service more highly.”

Furthermore, the existence of a free, accessible service to conduct intercountry adoption tracing was reported by respondents to be indispensable to their long-term mental health and wellbeing:

“I always envisioned spending a lot of money to have to do this and a lot of emotional effort, but this service completely eliminated the burden of those aspects for me so I can focus on the things that matter.”

Despite the reality that the circumstances of intercountry adoption can lead to the inability to achieve conclusive results in tracing, the service provides intercountry adoptees with the possibility for further clarity around their sense of identity. This is highlighted through the following two responses:

“The service has had a positive impact on the overall wellbeing of myself, my daughter and our family as we feel everything has been done to locate my daughter’s birth mother. No stone was left unturned.”

“Our adopted son appears happy and confident but as parents we want to seek every opportunity to allow him to have all the ‘pieces of his puzzle’ in place and knowing that there is a small chance to find his birth mother/ family would provide him with the missing piece.”

Recommendation of Service

Nearly all respondents indicated they would recommend the service to other adoptees and adoptive families.

Three key themes arose out of the reasons why the respondents would recommend ICATRS:

1. The accessibility and appropriateness of the service:

Respondents indicated without the service they would not be able to commence a search for biological family members overseas.

"Often parents of adopted children do not know the best place to start when trying to trace birth families and also how to support their children through the process. The service provides a starting point and strategies of how to support and talk to your child about the process."

"This service seems to access different records and people that would ordinarily be out of reach for a private citizen."

2. The indispensable need for the service:

Respondents indicated there is a high need for ICATRS and every intercountry adoptee should have a right to search. Furthermore, in relation to this respondents indicated there are no services similar to ICATRS.

"It is a service that is highly needed for intercountry adoptions especially for adult adoptees."

"All adoptees/families should have the opportunity to search if they have a desire to do so."

"This is the only service I know of this kind... We need advocates like ISS to help people who are born overseas and adopted into Australia. They need people to help them find paperwork, which can sometimes be really obscure."

3. High level of expertise of the Social Workers:

The respondents indicated they would recommend this service due to the experienced staff members.

"It was so easy and especially lovely to have someone I can email with questions or to check in who is trained to deal with adoption trauma and thus naturally empathetic."

Improvements to the Service

The majority of the respondents indicated they had full satisfaction with the service. Respondents indicated the service had met all their needs:

"I think the services provided, in our case, met all our needs."

The recommendations made by respondents generally expressed wishes to expand and improve ISS Australia's overseas searching partners in order to allow for more reliable tracing, and to improve the support resources available to ICATRS. Suggestions included:

"A bigger team with a contact in each state that you could have face-to-face contact with."

"A source for connecting with Social Workers in the place of birth."

"Online portal with information on your research and progress that we can log onto."

"Funding for DNA tests, funding for everything in general."

Additional comments

Additional comments made by respondents thanked the service for their work and noted it was critical ISS Australia receives ongoing funding for ICATRS. Some comments included:

"ISS deserves more funding. Without it, they cannot provide the necessary service to keep going ahead for future adoptees and their parents."

"ISS cannot do it without funding. They fill in the niche. A further need for a legal team within the ICATRS service and need for more caseworkers. We have an endless amount of people waiting for a service like this."

"We are very thankful to ISS for their guidance and support during the process of finding our child's birth mother. The Social Workers' advice on how to approach delivering information to our child, and how to communicate with other parties involved in the search was extremely helpful. Our goal was to find our child's birth mother and ISS achieved this goal, handling all relationships along the way with respect and care."

Part B: Interview Findings

Six key themes were identified: timing, impact of service, impact on individual, accountability to all parties, the global picture and addressing the gap.

Timing

The length of time associated with the tracing process did not have an impact on the participant's satisfaction with ICATRS. Participants noted they were aware, prior to contacting ISS Australia, tracing is a complex and lengthy process. Furthermore they had awareness that timing, in relation to tracing, is unpredictable.

"Timeframes is something that is just unpredictable... I think they did everything they can and I do not think they could have done anything quicker." (Adoptive Parent 1)

Participants recognised the staff at ISS Australia had adequately explained to them the process involved with tracing and the length of time associated with the process. Therefore, the majority of participants were surprised by how quickly ISS Australia obtained relevant information from overseas.

"ISS workers were pretty clear on saying we do not know how quickly we will be able to move on this. I was surprised that it moved very rapidly." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"They found my birth mum in two weeks... I was not expecting it to go that smoothly, I was kind of in disbelief." (Adult Adoptee 2)

Participants were very satisfied with the tracing service due to the timely and professional manner of staff. They commented that their allocated Social Worker was excellent in keeping them up to date with what was going on with their case and they felt that they could approach their tracing Social Worker at any time to discuss their case. In addition, both intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents felt the tracing process should not be rushed and any information was beneficial. One adoptive parent noted they thought the length of time of the tracing process would increase as the demand for the service increases, without additional resources.

"Everything takes time and you cannot rush these sorts of things." (Adult Adoptee 1)

"I think at the moment it is an incredibly professional and skilled workforce that the funding is using. As the demand increases I think the time would increase without additional resources." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"ISS were great in keeping in contact with us... I think they did everything they can and I do not think they could have done anything quicker. If something was happening, they would let us know and if there was a waiting period then we knew that to...I would say that them keeping in touch and supporting us when other information was needed certainly helped." (Adoptive Parent 1)

In all interviews, it became apparent a major influence on the length of time associated with the tracing process is the amount of information the adopted person or their family is able to provide ISS Australia with at the outset of their search. The adopted person's country of origin and when they were adopted were also significant factors.

"The tracing was really fast. It all depends on how much information you have at hand." (Adoptive Parent 3)

Timing appeared more significant in relation to at what stage of the adoptees life the individual or adoptive parents decided to trace. Adoptive parents started the tracing process for their child at various ages. The main motivations to start searching were: their child starting to ask questions about their adoption and birth family, their child wished to start searching or they viewed it was important to start the searching process whilst their child was still young (prior to reaching puberty). This is highlighted through the two responses below:

"Either the timing was not right for the family or our daughter was not mature enough to have the discussion." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"It will be an ongoing process. As she gets older her ability to understand what is going on is going to change. It was important for us to do it while she was young enough that it was not scary... so there was not a whole lot of anxiety about it... We felt very strongly that we wanted to do it for [our daughter] now to normalise it a little bit so it is not as fearful for her and as she approaches teenage hood she has already met her birth mother a few times." (Adoptive Parent 3)

There was a significant age gap between the two adult adoptees interviewed. This meant their tracing journey varied: one adult adoptee had not contacted any other organisations prior to ISS Australia to start searching, whereas the other adult adoptee had been searching for over 20 years, however, they both indicated they started searching when they felt the timing was right. This is highlighted in the following response from an adult adoptee, who indicated when he was ready to search, he accessed the internet to find the service:

"I think if the person is ready to do it. Literally all you have to do is type in [...]" (Adult Adoptee 2)

Impact of Service

Both intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents viewed the tracing service as a pioneering service in the field of intercountry adoption. They regarded intercountry adoption as a complex area where professional support is needed. Participants felt the staff at ISS Australia were able to provide them with the specialist support needed to search for birth family overseas. They indicated the staff at ISS Australia understood intercountry adoption, and were therefore able to provide intercountry adoptees and their families with both logistical and emotional support.

"We were trying to work out how we do that [tracing] ... when we found out the tracing service was available, it was such a relief as we did not have to think about that [logistics of searching]" (Adoptive Parent 4)

"We had not formally started the process but were gathering information, until the right professional organisation that seemed to know what they were doing... when I met the workers at this workshop, I was suitably impressed by their listening skills and their knowledge and their sensitivity. I thought these guys are the professionals that we have been waiting for." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"They understand the needs of people who themselves have been adopted either locally or from international countries, they also have a degree in this. So really, they are in the best position to deliver a service." (Adult Adoptee 1)

"There are people trained there... It is not just the doing, it is the emotional support, for the children and for myself... I absolutely admit that I was a sobbing mess one phone call to ISS and they handled it beautifully because they understand it and that just comes from experience." (Adoptive Parent 1)

The majority of participants explained they had encountered various practical issues when conducting a search privately. These included issues around documentation, communication and obtaining the right information, therefore they noted ISS Australia was needed in order to overcome these issues. ISS Australia were able to bypass some of these issues due to their access to technology, overseas partners and other resources which individuals do not have ready access to. This is highlighted through the following two responses:

"You as an individual have to do as much as you can, but it is not easy, because [country of origin] are not very good at keeping records and paper trails. That is where ISS comes in... they have other resources... [and] connections that I could not dream of." (Adult Adoptee 1)

"You have the support of the tracing service and you can do some investigation yourself. Just doing it yourself it seems like it is not that safe without the support of the tracing service." (Adoptive Parent 4)

Impact on Individual

Adoption impacts individuals and families differently. Adoptive parents shared that some children had a longing to search for their birth parents, whilst others did not, however they noted everyone should have the right to search.

"Do everything we can to try and give them the chance to know their beginnings. It is up to the individual families then to go I want contact, I do not want contact...who are we to make that choice on behalf of that child. I think society should do everything and international society should do everything to at least give our children the chance and their birth families the choice." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"I guess amongst intercountry adoptees there are children who are very accepting of their situation and just get on with things and searching for their birth family is not necessarily top of mind... Others like our daughter need information and better contact with the family they were relinquished from." (Adoptive Parent 1)

Furthermore, adoptive parents' perceived information about their child's birth parents had a positive impact on their child's mental health and wellbeing.

"Our daughter [name removed] had a great experience... it was a really positive outcome and our daughter [name removed] has now met her mother, we always had a photo of her birth mother in the room and we always spoke to her openly about where she comes from and culture... but now she has actually met her." (Adoptive Parent 3)

"The outcome for our children and overall health and wellbeing, including mental health, has been very positive." (Adoptive Parent 1)

Searching for birth family overseas is important for the identity formation of intercountry adoptees. Both adult adoptees and adoptive parents indicated obtaining information about their/their child's culture and birth family was important for their/their child's identity. An intercountry adoptee acknowledged the importance of language in relation to their identity. Furthermore, intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents on behalf of their child indicated they felt like they did not quite fit in with either culture (country of origin and Australia). This is due to their appearance resembling their country of origin, however having been raised in the Australian culture their appearance does not reflect their lived culture, language etc.

"It has been life changing for our family and our daughter. Whilst she will continue to have identity difficulties and that sense of belonging is hard for her... it is such a big part of the kids and who they are, they have the right to know." (Adoptive Parent 1)

"There are many negative attitudes to our children in both where we are living in Australia and when they return to their country of origin, it triggers all sorts of mixed emotions. They look like they are from that country but they do not behave like that, they do not fit in." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"Because that is who you are, it is [language] part of your make up, it is part of your identity." (Intercountry Adoptee 1)

The outcome of tracing birth family overseas was not always the most important aspect of searching for both intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents. Instead, participants perceived the process of searching was beneficial in itself.

“At least our daughter got involved, she participated, initially reluctantly and then opened up. She made a relationship and so for me I feel like it was the best outcome for her. Because it was not something she ever considered or shared with anyone before that I am aware of. It has opened up the opportunity to talk about it following our visit to [country of origin]... it is a long journey, we were realistic, we did what we could do at this time and we will continue to chip away as the world changes.” (Adoptive Parent 2)

“The tracing process for me, if something good comes of it that is great, if it does not then I have not lost anything have I. What has come out of it, is that I have been able to tell my story and that I have hopefully left my mark on the world in a quiet way.” (Adult Adoptee 1)

Accountability to all Parties

Participants shared that ISS Australia’s ICA Tracing Service takes into account all parties: the adoptive parents, the adoptee and the birth family. This was viewed as being really important and indicated private searchers did not take the same care in contacting the birth family.

“Having someone to correspond in the middle, who fully understands the context of the situations and knows how to negotiate the situations is so important.” (Adult Adoptee 2)

“Very much understood and saw both sides. As in not just the birth mother thinking the children are happy so they are all good, it saw the adoptees side which is really needing to know its roots, without necessarily seeing or having contact. Even just having information is so important to them [intercountry adoptee] for their identity... And I think their [ISS Australia] perspective of the adoptive parent.” (Adoptive Parent 1)

“It was the way that ISS and [overseas partner] conducted the contact. Which was really professional and caring and we could not have had that experience without the service. If we would have tried to do it ourselves or had a detective... it is [birth family contact] not done with the same care.” (Adoptive Parent 3)

Furthermore, they indicated ISS Australia played an essential role in facilitating the communication between the intercountry adoptee and the birth family member(s) overseas. This was especially in relation to overcoming language barriers.

“To have someone that supports the contact and supports both sides, has just changed everything, it is a very positive thing.” (Adoptive Parent 1)

“It is harder for us as they are illiterate and do not have a phone so we cannot send letters or anything... It is really important that we have a go between as well... [and] that we have an agency to act on our behalf.” (Adoptive Parent 3)

“None of this would be possible if it was not for them... across the language barrier and maybe the cultural [aspect] as well.” (Adult Adoptee 2)

“That was going to be the challenging thing, to find that person that was going to speak the language and know how to do things discretely.” (Adoptive Parent 4)

ISS Australia’s connections to overseas partners was important to participants. They found it extremely valuable to have face to face support whilst visiting their country of origin. One adoptive parent acknowledged ISS Australia had set up strong overseas network partners:

“Because I feel they have got the understanding of adoption issues because that is what their core basis of existence is, it is all about adoption and family and connection and I think they have professional staff with the capacity to actually do that in a positive way. I think they are the best agency and they also have contacts all around the world, they are in the position to be able to facilitate that.” (Adoptive Parent 3)

Global Picture

Adoptive parents felt there was not enough support once the adoption was finalised. They indicated that it is essential post adoption support is available, as Australia has intercountry adoption programs:

“We have the program in Australia, we do have intercountry adoption, there is a lot of fantastic things and lovely families that are formed from it but the support, I think is lacking afterwards, and this is what it is, it is post adoption, it is the post adoption follow up.” (Adoptive Parent 1)

“It is one of the basic things that we learn when we are being educated on adopting children from other countries: is that it is really important for them to not only retain contact with their culture but also that eventually the best thing for them is to have birth family contact... It is the creed, it is what all agencies actually tell you. For them to go around and cut the funding, are they saying that it is not important enough to be funded anymore? It is going against the first mandate of adoption philosophy, maintain birth family contact when at all possible.” (Adoptive Parent 3)

Historical events, societal shifts, media and culture have an influence on how intercountry adoption is viewed today within society. Adoptive parents acknowledged the media and past adoption practices had a negative impact on how intercountry adoption is viewed today and as a result the services available to intercountry adoptees. One adoptive parent noted it is the best time for an intercountry adoption search service to exist nowadays due to the access of technology and the societal shift of views about intercountry adoption.

"I think the culture in Australia and in adoption and in intercountry adoption has all evolved. That maybe it was not a priority in the government in the past. The amount of information on the internet and the amount of research coming out in the field, they are aware and they are changing practices slowly and they are trying to influence governments and services. It is going to take time, but without organisations like ISS in developed countries it is going to take longer. So I really believe that the timing not only for our family and as an individual case, but in the historical and international perspective is really good and that I really urge the government to reconsider its stance and reconsider prioritising such an important issue... This is in the Hague Convention and this is human rights and it is a right of the family to have this support and to do our utmost to try and give them the information and opportunity to make choices." (Adoptive Parent 2)

"A very complex and highly thought about issue adoption. I think because of Australia's history in relation to the Stolen Generation, so the past atrocities that have involved adoption, have impacted on the way our culture views adoption. Australia has a really negative view of adoption and that is facilitated by the media a lot of the time... It is very different [today], it is way more checks and balances, it is child focused, and that is the way it should be. I do not know how to change that perception around adoption but that is a talk that we have to have amongst ourselves within the adoption community, with the politicians, with the department, how do we change that culture?" (Adoptive Parent 3)

Addressing the Gap

It is clear the tracing service at ISS Australia addresses a gap in post-adoption support available to intercountry adoptees and their families. Participants voiced a strong need for the service to continue.

"It is absolutely vital that it continues, without this service I would have not been able to go to Vietnam, I would not have had the support whilst in Vietnam... and the documentary would not have been done without their support and other people would have not been able to benefit without this vital service. It is the only service of its kind." (Adult Adoptee 1)

"There must be a lot of people discovering this service just like us, we just recently discovered the service and it is a thing that is going to help us find our son's family. It is very important and they really should not get cut." (Adoptive Parent 4)

Furthermore, the following suggestions were made in relation to what additional services or improvements could be made: humanitarian lawyer for intercountry adoptees, access to support earlier on, more overseas searchers, more media, ISS Australia to run more events and meet ups:

"You really need people who have expertise in that particular area of childhood trauma and attachment issues and things like that... we have not personally needed that service with our daughter but we definitely know lots of families that have needed that service and have found it really hard to find people who were experts in that area." (Adoptive Parent 3)

"More often meetings here... where all the professionals come together and have a good discussion of where things are at and where children can listen to it and hear what is involved in the search... [and] every three months zoning on into a country, looking at it culturally." (Adoptive Parent 4)

"If they had the opportunity to put more things on... more events on that can bring people together... I think ISS is a great organisation that could be the core organisation and perhaps maybe other organisations could link in with them... I find that there are little groups, adoption groups, everywhere but they need some sort of centre where everyone can link up.... for them to be the overarching [organisation] and bigger involvement from little groups that are in the community would be good." (Adoptive Parent 3)

Analysis

The survey and interview findings illustrated clients were extremely satisfied with the service delivery, quality and professionalism of the Social Workers at ISS Australia. Furthermore, ICATRS has had a positive impact on client's wellbeing and clients highly recommend this service.

This is consistent with current research, which indicates the importance of intercountry adoptees knowing information about their biological family and country of origin for the development of their identity. This is as many intercountry adoptees struggle with their identities as they grieve a 'loss of immediate family connections as well as not feeling that they belong to the history, culture and story of the adoptive family' (Clare 2014: 1). This is consistent with the main reasons for tracing as illustrated in the survey results (i.e. a natural curiosity to trace and identity issues) and proves these needs for Australian intercountry adoptees and their families are able to be met through ICATRS. This is also shown throughout the survey and interviews, as the majority of respondents acknowledged that the service had a positive impact on their wellbeing. The fact that only 7% of respondents had a reunion and that the service had a positive impact on 75% of respondents highlights any information and support provided to intercountry adoptees and their families is highly valued.

In 2015, the Special Commission on Intercountry Adoption at The Hague recommended: "that the possibility of a child searching for his or her origins be included in the counselling and preparation of the prospective adoptive parents. When an adopted child or an adult adoptee undertakes such a search, professional support at all stages is recommended" (HCCH 2015: 4). The survey and interview findings indicate the service meets this requirement, through the high standard of the service and high level of expertise of the Social Workers. This is highlighted by a respondent who shared:

"ISS has the knowledge, experience and contacts that an individual is unable to access. Also an adoptee or adoptee's parent is emotionally involved and therefore may rush the process if searching on their own, where as a Social Worker is detached and would consider all parties involved."

Historical and societal events have had an influence on how intercountry adoption is perceived today. This was highlighted through the interviews and the opinions of adoptive parents which were consistent with the existing literature (Fronek 2012; Fronek and Cuthbert 2013; Riggs and Due 2015).

Additional themes and content emerged out of the interviews which had not been discussed in previous literature. These were timing and accountability to all parties and were not highlighted in previous literature as they are specific to delivery of the service. In relation to timing, participants explained they were aware of and prepared by the staff at ISS Australia about the ambiguous length of time associated with tracing.

Furthermore, adoptive parents noted that they were used to waiting a long time in matters relating to their child, as the process of adoption is lengthy in the Australian context (AIHW 2017: 6).

In relation to the accountability to all parties, participants viewed it as important to have a middle person to communicate through and that they appreciated the professionalism of ICATRS staff and their ability to understand the viewpoints from all the different parties involved in adoption. In addition, participants indicated they appreciated ISS Australia's connections to overseas parties, which allowed clients to have face to face support in their country of origin when doing a return visit. These views were also illustrated through the survey findings. In fact, one respondent noted in the survey they would like "a source for connecting with support workers in place of birth", further highlighting the importance of ISS Australia building strong connections overseas.

Current literature identified a need for ongoing support for intercountry adoptees and their families. Both adult intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents indicated they felt they received the support they needed through the tracing service, however it is concerning participants felt there was a lack of post placement support, prior to contacting ISS Australia. This is particularly of concern as literature has shown intercountry adoptees have many complex needs which need to be addressed through appropriate services early on (Scarvelis et al. 2017: 431).

It is important to note the limitations of the review. Firstly, 64 clients completed the survey and only 6 clients participated in the interviews. The ICATRS' service had 226 clients at the time of review, and care needs to be taken when generalising the findings of the report outside of the participants. In addition, the participants of the interviews were mainly adoptive parents; therefore their views may have been reflected to a greater extent in the findings. In general, the findings of the interviews were consistent with survey results and what has been highlighted in past literature (Scarvelis et al. 2017; Ferreira 2014; Clare 2014; Fronek and Cuthbert 2013; Fronek 2012; Riggs and Due 2015). It appears that clients who had a positive experience with the service were more likely to complete the surveys or participate in the interviews. Only one negative response was captured in the survey, where the respondent did not wish to recommend the service, however did not provide a reason why. This could have been as clients were taking the time out of their own day to participate in the interviews and were not offered any form of reward. Instead, some clients indicated they benefited from participating in the interviews as it offered them a chance to talk about their experience with ICATRS and intercountry adoption. The main motivation to participate in the interviews appeared to be the client's ability to express their gratitude and need for the service.

Recommendations for the future direction of the service were provided by clients in both the survey and interviews. As clients overwhelmingly noted the service met all their needs, they wished for an expansion of the service through additional funding. This included: an increase in staff and overseas searching partners (including Social Workers in country of origin), the introduction of an online portal which can be accessed by clients, more events and meet ups for individuals impacted by intercountry adoption and for ISS Australia to become the lead intercountry adoption agency in Australia (allowing them to mentor and connect together all the smaller organisations and adoption groups). Clients also expressed a need for post placement support earlier on, which could be achieved through additional marketing of the service and a larger presence on social media. These suggestions are consistent with current literature as they illustrate the need for long term post placement support for intercountry adoptees and their families.

Conclusion

The Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS) has been a huge success since it first became fully operational in September 2016. ICATRS was established in response to a significant level of need for assistance and support in the Australian intercountry adoptee community. Many Australian intercountry adoptees experience identity, grief and loss, attachment and trust issues which can manifest into serious problems including anxiety, self-harm, mental health concerns and even suicide. Many have a great desire and need to access information and reconnect with biological family, country of origin, culture and language which can be very difficult for individual adoptees and their families who have little or no knowledge of how to navigate systems overseas and require professional support and counselling in both Australia and overseas.

ICATRS has been very successful in its brief period of operation, establishing strong partnerships with overseas searching partners, achieving many positive outcomes (including locating 55 biological families' overseas as well as facilitating 28 family reunions) and building up to its current level of 226 clients. It has been enthusiastically embraced by Australian intercountry adoptees, their families and professionals in the adoption field.

Furthermore, the success of ICATRS is clearly evident through the analysis of the survey results and the interviews. These indicate the respondents were extremely satisfied with the service and the overall service had a positive impact on their overall wellbeing. ISS Australia was able to provide clients with essential information which could aid with their or their child's identity formation and staff were seen as the experts in the area of intercountry adoption. Interview participants noted Australia is in the best position to support a tracing service for intercountry adoptees, due to the development in technology and a shift towards open adoption in local adoptions.

ISS Australia is very disappointed with DSS decision not to fund ICATRS past June 2018. ISS Australia remains committed to continuing to provide intercountry adoption tracing and reunification services to their current clients, however this presents challenges with no current funding for the current ICATRS staff positions. ISS Australia will continue to pursue alternative funding options so they meet this clear and important post adoption need by providing quality and specialised search and support services to the Australian intercountry adoption community.

Finally, this Review of ICATRS clearly identifies that the clients have been very satisfied with the service and their comments reflected a strong desire for the service to continue, with particular reference to the often lengthy, complex and costly process of overseas searching and the lifelong journey and impact of adoption.

Therefore it is critical that this service that was launched less than two years ago with such strong hopes and acclaim from service beneficiaries and others in the adoption field around the world, can continue to provide specialised tracing and reunification services to Australian intercountry adoptees and their families.

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Appendix I Survey Invitation

Dear [Insert Name],

My name is Rose Zwiers and I am a social work student on placement at International Social Service (ISS) Australia. I would like to invite you to participate in a short 10 question survey regarding your experience of using the Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service at ISS.

This survey is intended to provide International Social Service (ISS) Australia with a snapshot of our clients' engagement and satisfaction with the Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS). ISS Australia will collate and analyse your feedback as part of our Review of Tracing Service, which will be presented to our funding body, the Australian Government's Department of Social Services (DSS). Your feedback will assist in ensuring ISS Australia receives 2018/2019 funding from DSS and allow us to continue to monitor and improve our services. We value your time and input.

We acknowledge that this survey may raise some complex emotions for individuals reflecting on their adoption experience. If any of the content becomes unsettling, please feel free to exit out of the survey at any time. You may also wish to contact your Social Worker at ISS Australia for additional support or the Coordinator of the service, [name removed] (02) 9267 0300, Email ica@iss.org.au or any of the following services: Lifeline 13 11 14 (24 hrs), Mensline 1300 789 978, Kids Helpline 1800 551 800 (for under 25 year olds).

Please note that we are committed to keeping this survey confidential and anonymous, all of the information recorded in this survey will be de-identified from any references to personal identity.

Please use the following link to access the survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/icatrssurvey>

Kind Regards,
[Email Signature Removed]

Appendix II Survey Questions

ICATRS Survey

Welcome to ISS Australia’s survey regarding the operation of its Intercountry Adoption and Reunification Tracing Service. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may exit out of the survey at any time.

* Clicking on the ‘agree’ button below indicates that:

- a) I have read and understood the information provided to me by email about the purpose of the review.
- b) I understand that any of the information I provide may be recorded and analyzed by ISS Australia to conduct a review of their service.
- c) I understand that the review will be presented to the Australian Government's Department of Social Services and to the relevant state and territory government departments involved with intercountry adoption

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

ICATRS Survey

Please indicate whether you are an:

- ☐ Adult Adoptee
- ☐ Adoptee (under 18)
- ☐ Parent of an adopted child

Appendix II Survey Questions

What prompted you to begin your search now:

☐ Major life event (i.e. medical issue, marriage,birth of child, divorce, death of parent)

☐ Identity issues

☐ Natural curiosity to trace

☐ Your child is asking questions about their adoption

☐ Your child is displaying signs of grief and loss associated with their adoption

☐ Other (please specify)

At what stage of the tracing process are you at:

☐ Early enquiry stage

☐ Had initial meeting/discussion with ISS Australia Social Worker

☐ A request for information and/or a trace for birth family overseas has commenced

☐ Biological family members have been located overseas

☐ DNA tests have been undertaken to confirm biological relationships

☐ Contact or a reunion has occurred with a biological family member overseas

Please indicate how satisfied you are with the service at ISS Australia in relation to:

	Not at all satisfied	Slightly satisfied	Moderately satisfied	Very satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Preparation regarding your decision to trace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information provided regarding the tracing process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Support throughout the search process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information & support regarding impact of adoption	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix II Survey Questions

Please indicate how satisfied you are with the following qualities of your social worker:

	Not at all satisfied	Slightly satisfied	Moderately satisfied	Very satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Communication skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professionalism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sensitivity to your needs and feelings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding of adoption	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What impact do you think our service has had on your overall wellbeing?

- ☐ Positive impact
- ☐ Negative impact
- ☐ No impact
- ☐ Unsure

Please indicate why below:

Would you recommend this service to other adoptees/adoptive families that you know?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please indicate why below:

Appendix II Survey Questions

Are there any other services or resources that you think are needed in the ICA tracing area that are not currently available?

If you are interested in participating in an interview to discuss your experience of accessing ISS Australia's Inter-country Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service, please put your email details in the box below and the ISS Australia Student Social Worker Rose Zwiers will contact you. If you wish to protect the anonymity of your survey responses and are still interested in being interviewed, please email Rose on NswStudent@ica.iss.org.au with your contact details.

Any further general comments?

ICATRS Survey

Thank you for your time and your valuable feedback.

Appendix III Interview Information Sheet

Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS) Interview Information Sheet

This interview is a follow-up from the review that International Social Service (ISS) Australia conducted and presented to the Department of Social Services (DSS). Through these interviews, ISS Australia would like to gain a more in depth understanding of clients' engagement with ICATRS.

Therefore, I would like to invite you to take part in this interview. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in a 60 minute interview. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your tracing journey as an intercountry adoptee/parent of an adopted child and your satisfaction with the tracing service at ISS.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview for later analysis. This allows me to more accurately portray your point of view in the review.

Your identity will remain confidential. Your name and other identifying information will not be included in the final report. You can choose not to answer any particular questions and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. The data will be kept securely and destroyed after 7 years.

If you have any further questions about the review, please feel free to contact me at the email address below:

Name: Rose Zwiers

Email Address: [email removed]

Appendix IV Interview Consent Form

Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS) Review: Consent Form

I have read the information sheet relating to the review and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to the arrangements described in the information sheet insofar as they relate to my participation.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the interview at any time.

I agree / I do not agree to the interview being audio recorded (please circle your answer)

I agree / I do not agree to the interviewer taking notes during the interview (please circle your answer)

I have received a copy of this consent form and of the accompanying information sheet.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date: