EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

My Fellowship aimed to learn from international experience in the design and implementation of relationships and sex education (RSE) for children and young people.

Why is RSE needed? What should it look like and how should it be delivered? What is required to achieve successful implementation of RSE? What are the risks to implementation and how can they be mitigated? I sought the answers to these questions in my Fellowship travels across Ireland, the United Kingdom, Cologne, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States between May and July 2019.

My findings are intended to provide a useful resource for advocates, governments, schools, teachers, parents and communities who are considering implementing RSE. Above all, my findings seek to advocate on behalf of all young people, for their right to access comprehensive information and education that will allow them to pursue fulfilling lives.

THE CASE FOR COMPREHENSIVE RSE

Comprehensive RSE for children and young people promotes wellbeing for all and is known to be effective in reducing the incidence of negative sexual experiences and sexualised violence. Poor sexual wellbeing, sexual harassment and sexualised violence are issues that have received increased community attention, within Australia and abroad.[1] Gradually, RSE is being recognised as the key to combatting this social ill.

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1 See, for example: the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013 – 2017); the Australian Human Rights Commission National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities (2017); National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces (2018); the international Me Too and Times Up movements/social media campaigns.

RSE DESIGN FEATURES: CONTENT AND MODES OF DELIVERY

Across the jurisdictions I visited, certain RSE design features were consistently present or endorsed as contributing to efficacy. To that end, RSE must:

Utilise multiple sites of intervention

It cannot be limited to individual lessons or school programs – it must extend to whole schools, families and communities.

Be holistic

Matters of consent, respect and relationships cannot be separated from puberty, sex, bodies and families: to address these matters in isolation from each other is ineffective. RSE must cover topics of:

- Reproduction and families
- Expressing boundaries/consent
- Social/emotional development (friendships/relationships)
- Bodies (including puberty)

RSE must focus on improving knowledge, developing attitudes and building behavioural skills.

Be age-appropriate, repeated and consistent

RSE must be age-appropriate and initiatives should adopt a 'spiral curriculum' approach, progressively building on prior learnings.

Start in early childhood

It is important that children be exposed to RSE from a young age, in order to promote and protect wellbeing as early as possible.

Normalise a positive approach to sexuality and wellbeing

Reducing shame and taboo around RSE topics promotes the entitlement to wellbeing and increases the likelihood that young people will learn to communicate appropriately and openly about such matters over the course of their lives.

Promote diversity and inclusivity

Lessons, materials and resources should represent the lived experience of everyone; for example, images of people with disability and people of various ethnicities is important.

Be modified appropriately for particular groups

While all RSE should be relevant to the widest range of participants, particular groups will require important modifications in order to better meet their needs and ensure learning takes place – for example, students with educational needs or disability.

## Incorporate evaluation and protection mechanisms

Measuring performance of RSE initiatives is important, as is the need to ensure protections are in place to support the safety of participants.
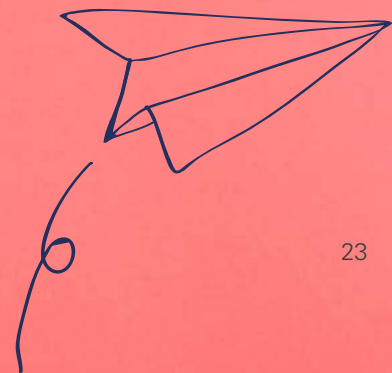
IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS FACTORS

Even the most well-designed RSE means nothing if implementation cannot be achieved. There are six key factors for successful implementation:
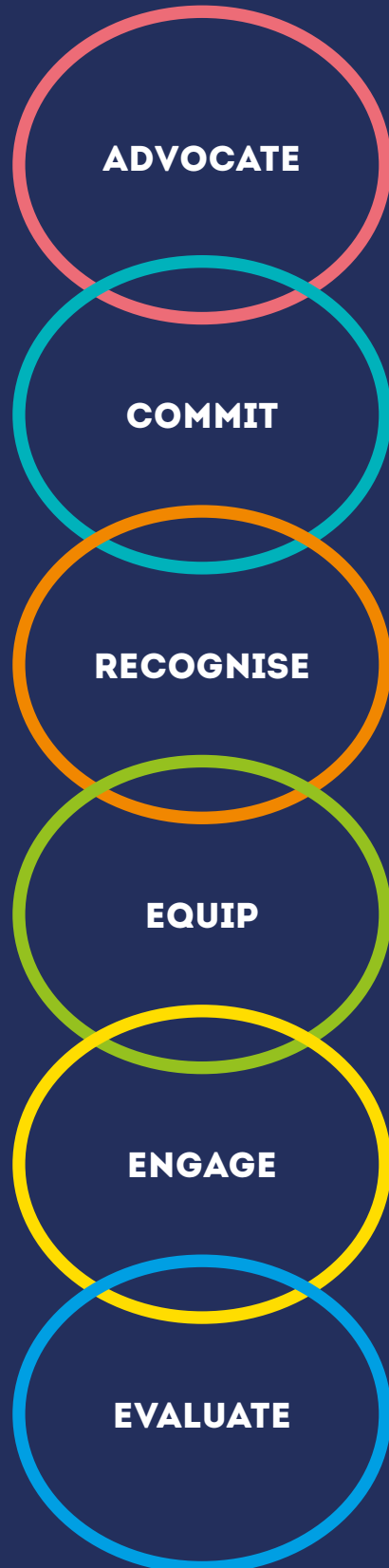
ADVOCATE

01 ADVOCATE
Advocacy, lobbyism and pioneering in the pursuit of universal and comprehensive RSE must be harnessed.

COMMIT

02 COMMIT
Governments and public institutions must offer structural support and commit to RSE action, deploying resources accordingly.

RECOGNISE

03 RECOGNISE
RSE must be recognised as a specialist field, relying on expertise and evidence to develop initiatives.

EQUIP

04 EQUIP
Schools and educators must be properly equipped, trained and supported for RSE delivery.

ENGAGE

05 ENGAGE
Parents and caregivers must be engaged at an early stage.

EVALUATE

06 EVALUATE
Evaluation and accountability mechanisms must be used.

RISKS TO IMPLEMENTATION AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

However, even where each of these factors are present, RSE implementation may still be vulnerable to risks presented by resourcing impediments or, significantly, opposition. Fear, ignorance and misinformation all contribute to the likelihood of opposition arising and/or succeeding in derailing RSE initiatives. Mitigation strategies must focus on:

- **Retaining structural support** e.g. relying on evidence, international collaboration, communicating community interest to politicians.

- **Keeping schools on board** e.g. word of mouth, reputation and engaging school boards.

- **Engaging and persuading parents** e.g. ensuring transparency, providing evidence and information.

- **Harnessing the media** e.g. informing the story and pre-empting propaganda efforts by conservative pundits with specific facts and details.

CONCLUSION

Governments, communities, schools, families and individuals must act on their duty to the wellbeing of our youth and prioritise universal access to comprehensive RSE.

To mistake ignorance for innocence and to insist on covering the ears of our youth is to leave their wellbeing and safety to chance. Children and young people have a right to access information that will help them make autonomous decisions and lead fulfilling lives. Attention must be given to RSE design and implementation strategy if to succeed.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RSE Design Features:

1.1   Core principles for RSE must be developed by relevant experts, informed by evidence and international experience.

1.2   RSE initiatives must have the following features:
- A multi-site intervention approach:
  - For example, beyond schools and families, consideration should be given to the use of youth groups, sports clubs, online platforms, television, social media and public campaigns to deliver RSE.
- Holistic and age-appropriate lessons and activities, which aim to increase knowledge, develop values and build behavioural skills, covering the four themes of:
  - Reproduction and families
  - Expressing boundaries/consent
  - Social/emotional development
  - Bodies and puberty.
- Repetition and consistency.
- Commencement in early childhood.
- Aim to normalise a positive approach to sexuality and include scientifically accurate information.
- Promote diversity and inclusivity.
- Modifications for particular groups in consultation with or driven by relevant experts or members of those groups.
- Evaluation and protection mechanisms.
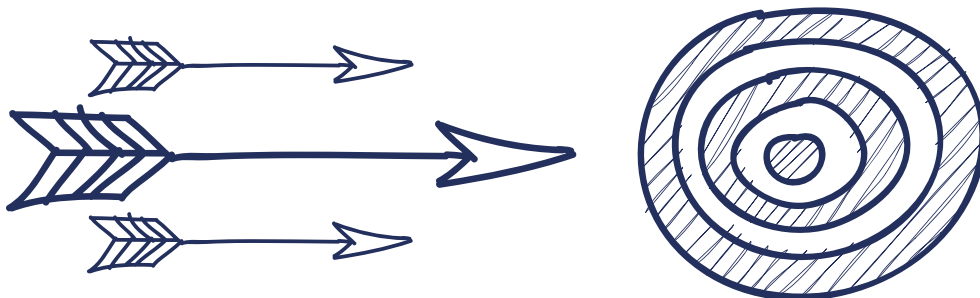
2. Implementation Success Factors:

2.1.1   Lobby groups consisting of key stakeholders and dedicated to the pursuit of comprehensive RSE in schools be formed, either at the national or local level.

2.1.2   Where appropriate, existing RSE initiatives should feed into policy and implementation strategy development.

2.2   Governments must:

2.2.1   Conduct formal reviews into existing RSE policies, programs, curricula and other initiatives within their jurisdiction.

2.2.2   Make public declarations recognising the importance of access to comprehensive RSE and make commitments to action in RSE implementation.

2.2.3   Form or rely on existing advisory groups to inform policy and implementation strategy.

2.2.4   Enshrine the right of young people to access RSE, for example in Human Rights legislation where it exists.

2.2.5   Introduce legislation requiring primary and secondary schools to deliver RSE, with sufficient specificity to ensure some of the key features of program design are mandated.

2.2.6   Create or fund existing entities, including government departments, to conduct research and develop evidence-based curricula, programs and/or resources in consultation with and informed by relevant experts and advisory groups.

2.3.1   Governments recognise RSE as a specialist field and ensure evidence and expertise informs policy, RSE design and implementation strategy.

2.3.2   Schools recognise RSE as a specialist field and assign it appropriate status and priority within the school curriculum and staffing structure, for example by creating RSE departments and requiring staff to demonstrate interest, ability and capacity to join the department.

2.2.4   Specialist policies, RSE design and implementation strategies be developed specifically for population groups with particular needs, by or in consultation with experts or members of those groups.

2.4.1   The school be positioned as the chief site for RSE implementation.

2.4.2   RSE audits be conducted within schools and whole school policies be adopted.

2.4.3   Tertiary qualifications for teaching and education must include RSE training (including disclosure training) to ensure education professionals attain baseline skills in RSE.

2.4.4   RSE lessons, programs, teaching packages and initiatives be developed by experts and integrated into the school curriculum.

2.4.5   Where RSE is to be delivered by external agencies, policies must be in place to ensure those external agencies are:
- Appropriately qualified and expert to deliver RSE
- Aware of any sensitivities or particular needs of the school, class or individuals
- Able to ensure repetition and consistency is achieved.

2.4.6   Where teaching staff are to deliver RSE, they must undertake additional comprehensive training with appropriate experts, such as those who have designed the relevant RSE program, teaching package or initiative.

2.4.7   Schools provide appropriate support to teaching staff, particularly when fielding complaints from community members or parents.

2.5.1   Implementation strategies and school policies must include methods for engaging parents, including the provision of information about what will be taught and modes of delivery.

2.5.2   Governments should consider whether and how the right to withdraw should be retained.

2.5.3   Information be provided to communities and families regarding matters relevant to RSE, including why children and young people should have access to it, as well as information to equip parents to address their children's RSE needs within the home.

2.6.1   Evaluation methods be developed by appropriate experts, in consultation with those designing RSE initiatives and advisory groups.

2.6.2   Evaluation of both RSE design and implementation be conducted, at classroom, school, regional and national levels.

2.6.3   Accountability mechanisms, such as school inspections or awards/endorsement programs be developed to ensure RSE design is appropriate and implementation is effective.

3. Mitigating Risks to Implementation

3.1   Governments adequately fund RSE research, design and implementation on an ongoing basis.

3.2   Action plans anticipating the potential sources and nature of opposition to RSE be developed.

3.3   An evidence-based resistance approach be taken when responding to opposition to RSE.

3.4   Pro-forma information sheets and responses to common criticisms of RSE be developed.

3.5   Data about levels of community/parental support for RSE be obtained.

3.6   Pre-emptive media briefings and campaigns specifying the need for RSE, the nature and degree of consultation with parents, and the details of any RSE content and modes of delivery be undertaken.

3.7   International collaboration and information-sharing be prioritised.