

**RESPONSE TO PRODUCTIVITY
COMMISSION DRAFT REPORT:
*A PATH TO UNIVERSAL
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE***

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On behalf of:

VU's Higher Education Early Childhood
Education Program

Acknowledgement of Country



Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/YUgarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

The following are brief responses to those aspects of the report in which we have greatest experience and expertise. Our responses are under headings:

Information request
Responses to draft findings
Responses to draft recommendations
Responses to key points
And, a note on international models.

Information Request:

Falling completion rates for early childhood teaching qualifications. The Commission is seeking views on the factors that have led to a decline in completion rates of early childhood teaching qualifications. [Information request 3.3]

Unpaid placements are a significant factor in students not completing their degrees. Many students struggle to complete full-time, unpaid placements because of the financial stress it places on them. If they are already working as educators, and upskilling, they are not in well paid positions that mean they can save for placement periods. Moreover, pressure is often applied from the centre where they work, to not do placement outside the centre, as backfill is so hard to get. Placement therefore creates pressure points for centre managers and for the student/employee.

Challenges are also experienced by students attempting to manage a study load with full time employment, and often family commitments as well. ECT students experience a significant rate of burn out. It is notable that many people upskilling from diploma educator to Bachelor EC teacher have families with children and aging parents. The point at which they seek to upskill is also often the period during which they have extensive caring responsibilities. In migrant populations, they may also be the translator for their parents. Consequently, family pressures play big part in non-completion of EC qualifications.

Students also need wraparound supports for study such as navigating the enrolment process, building their academic skills, developing familiarity using technology, building English literacy issues, as well as support with mental health issues. Additional barriers exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Students need access to high-quality mentoring whilst on placement, to support their on-going participation in their qualification.

Cultural safety in ECEC services

This response is informed by experience working with international students in the Higher Education sector. International students on placement encounter a range of discriminatory practices, and cultural clashes. There is a lack of awareness of differing work practices in different cultures, which fuels misunderstanding and, sometimes, prejudicial responses to students seeking mentorship.

93% of our commencing cohort of Graduate Diploma in ECE at VU in 2024 (i.e. approx. 1300 students) are international students. Many of these are studying ECE because of the opportunities it gives for permanent residency. This diversity is a good thing: children and families see educators and teachers like themselves, may share a first language with them, and can be more confident of cultural understanding. Moreover, many of these students are highly educated, with previous Masters degrees. However, large numbers of international graduates entering the profession also brings some challenges. Not all cultures have the same image of the child as is present in Australian culture and supported in Australian EL frameworks. Ensuring that international students who become ECTs in Australia understand play-based learning, children's agency and children as citizens is crucial to maintaining quality in EC provision. While it is therefore appropriate to welcome people from diverse cultural backgrounds as teachers in ECE, it is also important to ensure they have adequate education, professional development and support, particularly early in their careers.

Cultural capability across the sector needs improvement, and must include cultural safety for international students on placement and ECTs from non-Australian backgrounds. When teachers are culturally safe, they will be able to provide culturally safe settings to their colleagues, and the children and families they work with.

VU is working in partnership with the Victorian state government to develop cultural responsiveness in EC settings in Victoria via a specialised mentoring program for students, and the development of modules on best practice and understanding for centres.

Responses to draft findings:

Draft finding: Accelerated qualifications will help lift early childhood teacher numbers

Yes, this is one way of efficiently increasing the number of ECTs in the system. However, this doesn't suit everyone. Many educators are not confident entering a Higher Education context. They doubt their own ability to succeed, as well as working full time, and also often have various caring responsibilities. Accelerated pathways also mean accelerated placements, and in most cases that means more

time out of paid employment in order to complete placement. Many educators are also not strong with digital technology. In accelerated courses there is often an assumption that students can manage the technology requirements of the course and this can be very confronting for the student who is already lacking confidence in their capacity to learn. So, accelerated courses should definitely be offered, but there must remain choice in the system, and the recognition that some people take longer to learn than others. Early Childhood professionals are as competent as anyone else in a Higher Education context. However, cultural and historical perceptions of Early Childhood Education as ‘women’s work’ and ‘baby-sitting’, coupled with low rates of pay, mean that this is a cohort which requires innovation in the Higher Education system in order to address their needs as learners and the financial and time tensions they experience as employees.

Draft finding: Inter-jurisdictional differences in teacher registration impose unnecessary workforce barriers

We agree that any three- or four-year bachelor degree in ECE and any graduate diploma in ECE should be recognised in any state and territory in Australia. All ECTs should be able to register as teachers with their state registering body (e.g. VIT in Victoria); this registration should be transferrable to other states and territories.

Draft finding: There is more to learn about how ECEC programs can best improve children’s outcomes

While considerable work has been done on policy and structures in ECE, little has been done to determine what it is that expert teachers *do* in order to support children’s learning and development. The concept of ‘improving children’s outcomes’ needs interrogation – what do we expect from quality ECE? What do we mean by the term ‘outcomes’ when we are talking about young children? Are we talking about happiness? Agency? Citizenship? School readiness? Phonetic awareness? Mathematical thinking? There is definitely a great deal more to learn in this space; there is also more thinking to be done about how we identify best practice, quality and benefits.

Responses to Draft Recommendations:

Draft recommendation: Reduce barriers to educator upskilling

VU has been very successful in the upskilling area. Our Bachelor of EC Teaching is a model that has been embraced by educators upskilling to teachers. This place-

based model was created to support educators to work full time and study full time, developing a strong synergy between their practice at work and their studies. Students study two evenings a week in a zoom classroom, and one Saturday a month in person, usually in a location close to their home. The ECE team at VU developed strong relationships with Local Government Areas across Victoria, including regional and rural areas, in order to reach potential students, and to provide the In Person component of their course close to home. While we originally planned for 250 students in the course, we currently have about 1000. About half of these students are first-in-family to attend university. Programs like this can offer opportunities to students who would otherwise find studying impossible.

Government provision of financial support to ECEC services so they can provide paid leave to educators for them to complete supervised professional experience may assist in supporting educators to upskill. However, releasing educators to do placement is dependent on services being able to find backfill, which is not always that case. If we value quality ECE provision, then a skilled and educated workforce is essential and requires investment to ensure that certain groups are not disadvantaged.

This issue of placement provision is important to address. A significant number of students are doing placement in their workplace, as a way to reduce disruption to the service, and continue the student's flow of income. However, few, if any, studies have been done to determine whether this best equips students for the profession. The variability in quality and philosophy across services means there is little clarity about what constitutes 'quality placement'. Funding to universities to support high-quality placement experiences for students and for research into what a quality placement experience looks like is a significant part of ensuring that placement enriches the student's learning, rather than being 'business as usual'.

While upskilling is critical to ensure enough ECTs, it has a flow on effect of reducing the number of educators – as these upskill to being teachers. A second critical area for upskilling is Cert III to diploma. While this development of knowledge is hugely beneficial to the children being cared for, there are few incentives for educators to do this – minimal increase in pay, but often considerable increase in responsibility.

Draft recommendation: Establish an ECEC Commission

An ECE commission with a comprehensive research agenda is essential to continual improvement, evidence-based decision making, and the status of the sector. As a focus for policy, practice and research, it would provide an opportunity for greater national consistency, analysis of issues in ECE, and a clarification of the meaning and impact of 'quality' in the sector. It could also have a role in advocacy, and in

ensuring appropriate and equitable funding, and use of funding, across the NFP and For Profit sectors.

Responses to key points:

ECEC educators who are studying to become teachers should be offered greater flexibility to complete their qualifications while working.

VU is already doing this via its EBEI (Bachelor of EC Teaching) course (see response to *Draft recommendation: Reduce barriers to educator upskilling*, above). There are a range of ways in which universities can be more flexible. However, these require that academics have time to plan, universities have adaptable systems, and investment occurs into managing students on a more individual basis. The EBEI course is evidence that these adaptations can have impact, but they are expensive. Funding to universities can assist in managing large cohorts of students and help with retention in courses. VU's experience in this area provides evidence that additional staffing to guide students individually through the enrolment and advanced standing processes, and to work with students to create flexible learning environments, impacts positively on retention.

Increased flexibility in studying to become ECTs or educators might also be provided through micro-credentials which support staff to collect small 'units' of learning that can ultimately be bundled into qualifications or skills sets. Study undertaken as micro-credentials may meet the needs of potential students and centres more effectively, intensifying study into 'bite-sized' amounts that can be built into a qualification over a period of time. A second benefit of this is the culture of continual learning that it supports.

A note on International models:

In Sweden, payment for EC provision is made to the city; the city then pays salaries and maintains buildings. The payment is per child, with additional payments for children with special needs. This model for managing subsidies and payments means that profit-making at the cost of quality is reduced. The Australian model invites private providers to take the cream off the top and require the centre to run on minimal funding.