

# Response of the Australian Education Research Organisation to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*

February 2024

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## Summary

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's draft report, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*. AERO's vision is for Australia to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence. As the nation's independent education evidence body, AERO is uniquely placed to comment on the initial findings of the inquiry into the ECEC sector in Australia.

We are pleased to be named in the draft report as a key player in the reform of early childhood education and care (ECEC). This response expands on our first submission to the Productivity Commission to emphasise the opportunities to improve Australia's research and evidence base so that systems and services invest in the programs and practices that promote the best outcomes for all Australian children – especially those in vulnerable and disadvantaged contexts. It also demonstrates how AERO's work has laid the foundation to support improved data collection, sharing and analysis to drive evidence-informed practice and policymaking.

## An evidence-informed early childhood education and care system

Evidence offers a pathway to a more accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC system. To realise this, practitioners and policymakers require access to relevant, high-quality evidence to inform their work. Evidence can support educators, teachers and system leaders to understand which practices work best in different contexts, enabling them to tailor their programs, practices and policies to achieve the best outcomes for all children. By prioritising a research agenda that tackles the sector's greatest challenges and improving the ECEC data architecture, we can create a more complete picture of the ECEC landscape and work with the ECEC sector to ensure that evidence is informing decision-making in practice and policy.

## Accelerate access to high-quality research and evidence

There is a need for robust research to fill the gaps in our knowledge about what works best and for which cohorts in ECEC. An investment into a comprehensive ECEC research agenda will provide valuable insights into how programs and systems can improve children's outcomes. AERO is encouraged by the Productivity Commission's prioritisation of research into the factors that affect ECEC quality and their implications for Australian children. This prioritisation aligns with AERO's ongoing work, as outlined in our previous submission and planned work to commence in 2024.

AERO notes the Productivity Commission's recommendation to establish an ECEC Commission to lead the transition towards universal access (Draft recommendation 9.2 - Establish an ECEC Commission). However, rather than an ECEC Commission, AERO is best placed to lead the development and implementation of any national ECEC research agenda due to our existing research function as Australia's independent education evidence body and our established relationships with ECEC system leaders (Draft finding 1.2 - There is more to learn about how ECEC programs best improve children's outcomes).

Increasingly known for being a trusted source of high-quality evidence, AERO's purpose strongly aligns with the research priorities included in the draft report. AERO is focussed on:

- improving equity and access for all children, for example, our research report on [Promoting equity for multilingual children in early childhood](#)
- improving the quality of care and education for children, for example, our [early childhood learning trajectories](#) and the research report that underpins their development, [Early childhood learning trajectories: The evidence base](#).

As well, AERO is currently undertaking and has recently completed a range of projects, which contribute to our growing understanding of how ECEC programs can improve children's outcomes. These include:

### Understanding how children learn and develop and which practices maximise outcomes:

- working directly with ECEC services to explore successful approaches to implementation of the evidence-based practice of assessment for learning
- research into pedagogical approaches that improve educational and developmental outcomes for children and translating this into practical guidance for educators and teachers
- research into the mechanisms that support ECEC leaders, teachers and educators to use evidence-based practices, including professional learning

### Understanding service and system features that contribute to children's outcomes:

- analysing early childhood data to understand the relationship between ECEC quality and children's development

- analysing the ECEC experiences and pathways of participation that improve children's development outcomes, and how these vary for priority cohorts, especially in regional and low-socio-economic status areas
- research into how governments can improve access to quality ECEC in thin markets and factors that support effectiveness

This ongoing work provides valuable insights into the types and quality of ECEC experiences that best support children to thrive and is already being used to influence and improve policy, with our research informing two areas of the [National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy \(2022-2031\)](#) – mentoring and induction support for new teachers and options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers.

In addition, AERO is well-positioned to understand the priorities and gaps in research and work strategically with sector leaders and policymakers to ensure that an agenda is fit for purpose and driven by sector input. AERO is already working closely with ECEC system leaders, including policymakers across jurisdictions, representatives of peak body organisations, providers and university academics to ensure research evidence meets their needs as the primary users of system data. AERO can also draw on established advisory groups to advance a new national research agenda. Our First Nations Expert Reference Group, for example, would ensure a research agenda meets the needs of First Nations communities. Along with ECEC system leaders, AERO's advisory groups include membership from across the continuum of education and already meet on a regular basis to inform AERO's work.

AERO would work in partnership with the proposed ECEC Commission to support the coordination and delivery of ECEC policies (Draft recommendation 9.2 - Establish an ECEC Commission). Together, we can collaborate to leverage our impact by providing advice and research to governments on their investment priorities and the outcomes for children and families. However, to clearly delineate responsibilities and avoid duplicating existing functions, we recommend that the Productivity Commission endorse and invest in AERO as the independent research body responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of a national early childhood research agenda.

### Pursue a cohesive, national early childhood data architecture

As the Productivity Commission noted, there are limitations to the ECEC data that is collected by governments and how it is being used to support policy and practice. In our previous submission, AERO emphasised the need to improve how we collect, share, analyse and apply data in the early childhood sector if we are to improve equity for children. The submission also highlighted limitations in the early childhood data architecture that make it difficult to understand whether investments in programs and services are making an impact – specifically, that ECEC data is not linked and there is considerable variation in the quality and consistency of data.

While the draft report mentioned the importance of high-quality data to inform decision-making, it did not explicitly discuss the vital role that a comprehensive, national data architecture could have within the ECEC sector. Investing now in a cohesive, national early childhood data architecture will both support policymakers and set up a future ECEC Commission to effectively carry out its advisory and reporting functions from the day it is established.

AERO's [Early Childhood Data in Australia report](#) outlines opportunities for data to be better used to support children's learning and development. The Productivity Commission should consider the following recommendations to build a cohesive, national early childhood data architecture that tells a complete story about the interconnection between ECEC experiences, their quality and children's outcomes.

- **Work with key players in the sector to ensure ECEC data reflects their priorities**  
Peak body organisations and providers are key data users and generators in the ECEC sector, as are some policymakers. Further, engaging historically marginalised communities in interpreting patterns in the data and working with policymakers to develop data-driven responses could help to shift patterns of systemic disadvantage.
- **Link existing data to establish a national, child-centred longitudinal dataset**  
This will create a coherent picture that generates insights about what our policy priorities should be and what works for whom. This dataset should be held by a trusted, independent custodian that would be responsible for its linkage and management.
- **Invest in new, fit for purpose datasets to help answer critical questions for specific stakeholders**  
Insights from these datasets will provide a greater understanding about the factors that enable children's learning and development.
- **Identify opportunities to establish a consistent, national data governance framework**  
This framework would govern the collection and use of existing data across jurisdictions. It should take into account Indigenous Data Sovereignty, according to agreed principles for governance and data use (Walter et al., 2021).
- **Share progress on data linkage and insights from data through intergovernmental forums**  
Greater collaboration and information sharing will improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the ECEC system.

By making better use of ECEC data, Australia can build a stronger national evidence base to inform the work across our diverse services and communities. This can support a range of policy priorities such as improving access for children from diverse backgrounds, children with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## Working together to create change

High-quality research, evidence and data are essential to ensuring that the ECEC system delivers the best possible support to all Australian children. AERO has been working to address data reform and build a stronger evidence base so that everyone in the sector can benefit, especially children in vulnerable or disadvantaged communities.

AERO is uniquely positioned to partner with ECEC stakeholders and a future ECEC Commission to support and amplify the work that is already underway in this space. AERO has and will continue to play an important role in connecting and enhancing ECEC data use around a shared research agenda to better understand how programs and systems can improve outcomes for all children.

## References

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