

Response to Productivity Commission draft report on early childhood education and care

Dr Jen Jackson – personal submission

The draft report is welcome recognition of the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for Australian children and families. Its strengths are its scale of ambition and recognition of the need for action at scale. It recognises the great work already occurring in ECEC services while accepting that Australia can build on the progress already made to create a better ECEC system.

This submission draws on my experience as a researcher, policy-maker and preservice early childhood educator and teacher to offer provocations for further thinking about some of key points in the report. It is a personal submission and does not represent the view of any organisation.

ECEC is only one part of Australia's promise to its children

The report represents a significant step forward for Australia, in setting out a universal entitlement to three days (or 30 hours) of ECEC for all children. A universal entitlement is justified by the challenges that exist in the current system for all families, where even well-resourced families undergo complex 'juggling' and less advantaged families miss out altogether. A higher level of certainty in what is on offer in the system – and a commitment to delivering it – will benefit Australian society as a whole.

While children are rightly the focus of the draft report, the recognition that ECEC must work for families too (and, although not as prominently in the report, for the ECEC workforce) is welcome acknowledgement of the triple benefit that the ECEC sector can deliver for Australia. Considering the needs of children, families and ECEC professionals together will result in a strong, sustainable system.

The report could be enhanced by articulating the policy vision that underpins this entitlement. The collective responsibility that a society has to nurture its children, and provide families with support in the critical early years, goes beyond the provision of a service system. The *Starting Better* report from Centre for Policy Development, to which I contributed informed by advice from leading ECEC and policy experts, set out a vision for a *promise* that Australia must make to children and families, to be fulfilled through a combination of services and supports that responds to families' diverse needs and aspirations. ECEC is one component of this promise, integrated with other policies and programs.

The report recognises the connections between ECEC participation and other policies to support young children and their families, such as Paid Parental Leave. However it does not make a clear commitment to weaving other policy areas together with ECEC to form a robust basket of supports for every child. It is also dominated by language that reflects the productivity dividend of supporting children and families, rather than the social, ethical and cultural imperatives that might motivate Australia as a nation to step forward and make a lasting commitment to young children. Children are more than productive citizens – they are our future generation as well as precious in their own right.

Equity must be 'baked in' to system design

The bold step of establishing a new entitlement to ECEC must be undertaken with close attention to the opportunities it presents to close equity gaps – as well as the risks that it may exacerbate them. The draft report gives commendable attention to equity in terms of affordability and access to ECEC services, and the importance of increasing participation among children experiencing vulnerability.

The report does not engage with the more subtle ways in which systemic inequality can emerge. The current scarcity of skilled ECEC professionals creates a significant equity risk, as the highest-quality

ECEC services are already more likely to be found in more affluent communities.¹ ECEC expansion may have the opposite of its desired effect unless it is intentionally designed to increase the number of exceptional services in vulnerable communities, supported by equity-oriented funding models.

Equity also matters in the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment approaches used in ECEC services. In any education system, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that is built around mainstream or normative assumptions risks marginalising children and families who don't 'measure up'. Australia currently has world-leading early childhood learning and development frameworks that are designed to respond to diversity in strengths-based, inclusive ways – not only by guiding practice to narrow equity gaps, but in valuing all children's and families' own 'funds of knowledge'². The National Quality Standard also enables diverse enactments of quality that respond to communities.³

Developing the ECEC workforce is a significant equity opportunity

The draft report recognises the importance of ECEC to gender equality in enabling more women to participate in paid work while their children are still young (recognising that mothers are disproportionately affected by the impact of child-rearing on labour force participation).

The report does not recognise the role that ECEC plays in tackling inequality through the careers it offers to teachers and educators. There is some acknowledgement that the wage rises for educators that may result from changes to the Fair Work Act will help to improve gender equality. But the report does not call attention to the historical – and continuing – role of the ECEC sector in offering economic and social benefits for the (mostly) women who pursue fulfilling early childhood careers.

The socio-economic characteristics of the early childhood workforce were the subject of my doctoral research completed in 2018. Using large-scale data, I found that many early childhood educators came from backgrounds of relative socio-economic and educational disadvantage. I also found that ECEC provided one of the strongest pathways for young women who did not achieve highly at school to pursue higher vocational qualifications (Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas) or university degrees. Educators with vocational qualifications also demonstrated strong attachment to their work, being more likely than those with degrees to aspire to work in ECEC and remain in the sector for longer.⁴

The policy drive towards degree qualifications is well-justified by the need to better recognise the complexity of ECEC practice and improve remuneration for the workforce. The draft report supports accelerated pathways for Diploma-qualified educators to gain degrees as a way of rapidly building the supply of early childhood teachers – which will also help those educators gain recognition of their value. But the vocational education and training (VET) sector also has an important role to play in building the ECEC workforce, as the sector of opportunity for aspiring educators who prefer more applied vocational learning. Educators from diverse social, cultural and educational backgrounds may be especially valuable in equipping services to respond to similarly diverse children and families.

The interaction between educator qualifications and quality of practice is complex, as the draft report acknowledges, and warrants further investigation as the ECEC sector expands. The role of VET-qualified educators in delivering quality practice in Australia remains under-researched, and the draft report notes that available research has associated quality with VET diplomas. Continuing to explore

¹ Jackson, J. (in press). System inequality in early childhood education and care. In S. Lamb, M. Berends & B. Schneider (Eds.), *International handbook on sociology of education*. SAGE.

² See *Early Years Learning Framework*, p. 13

³ Jackson, J. (2015). Embracing multiple ways of knowing in regulatory assessments of quality in Australian early childhood education and care. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 42(4), 515-526.

⁴ Jackson, J. (2021). Developing early childhood educators with diverse qualifications: The need for differentiated approaches, *Professional Development in Education*, DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2021.1876151

this relationship is a clear research priority, to ensure that Australia’s dual tertiary education system (higher education and VET) is used to best possible advantage in growing the ECEC workforce – and in supporting career entry points and progression pathways for educators from all backgrounds.

Responsiveness is essential at whole-system and individual service level

The report recognises the wide diversity within the ECEC sector, in the types of services, programs and patterns of engagement by children and families. This diversity is a strength of the sector which will enable it to flex more readily to changes in communities and the economic and social context. A key challenge for the Inquiry is to provide sufficient certainty about a universal entitlement to quality ECEC while preserving the flexibility in the sector that supports its dynamism and responsiveness.

Excellent ECEC services respond to families and communities in everything they do, from planning schedules and ratios through to the daily program. This includes interacting with other services that children and families may access, and adapting to what every child needs – not shaping the child to fit within the service. My forthcoming article about one Excellent service, Gowrie Broadmeadows, describes how this high level of adaptivity and collaboration enables the service to engage diverse children and families, including those who have been turned away from services elsewhere.⁵

Similar adaptability and collaboration must exist at whole-of-system level. The recommendation to establish a national ECEC Commission is a promising opportunity for national system stewardship, and could be extended to cover all services and supports provided to young children and families. The Commission will be most effective if it is a catalyst for collaboration across the system – informed by a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence – to deliver the best suite of supports for each individual community, guided by the aspirations of children, families and the local ECEC workforce. Consistent with contemporary approaches to public policy that harness capability from multiple stakeholders,⁶ this may involve coordinating public and private resources to meet shared goals.

The Commission must also help sequence the changes affecting the ECEC sector. During my first-hand experience working in ECEC services in 2023, I vividly observed the level of demand already placed on the sector, which further reform will intensify. The reforms proposed in the draft report have immense potential to bring the sector to a point of equilibrium, where its role in Australian society is consolidated, its delivery models are stabilised (but not rigid), and its workforce can enjoy greater recognition alongside the intrinsic rewards of their roles. However, the process to get there will be arduous, and the Commission must work to coordinate change and manage pressure on the sector.

⁵ Jackson, J. (2024). Article forthcoming in Issue 1 of *Australian Educational Leader*.

⁶ Macklin J. (2020). *Future Skills for Victoria, Driving collaboration and innovation in post-secondary education and training*, Victorian Government, Melbourne