

Submission

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
ECEC Workforce requirements and capacity	4
Workforce remuneration and career pathways	7
Workforce professionalism	7
Conclusion	8
REFERENCES	10

INTRODUCTION

Members of the Faculty Research Group: Early Childhood Workforce Research Collective, Faculty of Education Monash University are appreciative of the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. In particular, as a research collective that is focused on researching the early childhood workforce, we bring to this submission our knowledge of current workforce constraints. In doing so, our submission focuses on supporting the Commission in addressing the issues of:

- **ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.**

The Early Childhood Workforce Research Collective (n.d), consists of senior academics who have track records in researching within early childhood, and in particular, workforce related research. One author has held an Australian Research Council Discovery Project “Investigating leadership in early childhood education” (Henderson, et al., 2018 - 2020). Other authors have been involved in leading professional development supporting the workforce in leadership (Clarke et al., 2019 - 2020) as well as being leading academics on the development and delivery of the “Respectful Relationships in Early Childhood Professional Learning” (Hammer, et al., 2017- 2020). We come together as a research collective to advocate for the early childhood workforce through our research and aim to ensure this has wide reach including influencing future policy making.

Our knowledge of the workforce is both local and national. We have broad connections with the sector including Australian Education Union, Early Childhood Australia, Victorian Department of Education and ACECQA. We have been attendants on Round Tables held by the Victorian Department of Education and ACECQA with the aim of

influencing workforce directives & career pathways. We also understand our role in relation to the ongoing pressures of the workforce as a key stakeholder and provider of Higher Education. We are active in the Workforce Strategy: Shaping our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022 – 2031 (ACECQA, 2021).

This submission engages with:

- **ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.**

In so doing it also indirectly engages with:

- The efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector,
- Impacts on demand, supply, and fee growth,
- Interactions with existing and planned Commonwealth, state and territory ECEC policy settings and funding, including recent commitments by the New South Wales and Victorian governments to expand access to 30 hours of preschool for children in the year before full time school and support more 3-year-old children to participate in preschool, and any commitments in response to the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

ECEC WORKFORCE REQUIREMENTS AND CAPACITY

The Australian ECEC workforce has been under strain for a number of years with research reporting issue of high staff turnover, low morale and wellbeing, and lack of professional recognition, including remuneration that is not commensurate with level of knowledge and professionalism (Cumming et al., 2021; Quinones, et al., 2021). In 2020 when COVID hit, the Australian ECEC workforce was further severely impacted. Key stakeholders drew

attention to the issues unfolding and the damage that was taking place as the ECEC workforce was positioned as an 'essential service' providing 'child care' for frontline workers (Duffy, 2020 & 2022). Responding publicly one early childhood teacher wrote about how she felt "invisible and that you count for nothing" (Spiden, 2020). This educator explained her confusion over the contradictions with government COVID-19 policy positions where it was not safe for schools to remain open, yet it was okay for educators to be asked to continue teaching stating: "we can't go anywhere but it's OK to go to early childhood settings. We must practice social distancing but it's fine if 30 children are in a room coughing, sneezing, touching and climbing over everything". In response she stated: "I'm done, I'm out. If I'm not a teacher what am I?".

Drawing attention to these emotive words, the intent of this submission is to put forward what is silenced and ignored by the media and politicians: **without significant workforce reform then National, state and territory governments reform measures are at risk of falling short of their aspirational goals**. We see this as an urgent matter that needs to be addressed immediately to become a reality for workplace reform if the aspired goals are to be met with an effective and astute workforce.

WORKFORCE RENUMERATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS

If the ECEC workforce is to **achieve the professional recognition it deserves** then the work conditions of educators must be a priority in any reform measures. With the complexity of the ECEC sector with not-for-profit and for-profit services, as well as variations across state jurisdictions, there are a number of different agreements and awards in place creating confusion for educators to even know which one they should be agreeing to when accepting an offer of employment. As noted by Lucas (2022) these agreements and awards are used interchangeably by employers making it perplexing, and therefore, easy to have an educator be employed under incorrect awards as a cost saving strategy to the employer. Whilst some states such as Victoria have been successful in negotiating an Enterprise Agreement for

early childhood teachers to ensure pay parity with school teachers, this is something that has been hard won through the ongoing and tireless efforts of the Australian Education Union, Victoria (AEU, 2023). To replicate this across all states and territories will require a strong commitment of both national, state and territory governments to enter into respectful and genuine dialogue with the relevant Union as well as the early childhood workforce itself – **a united voice that demands to be heard**. For too long the voices of the workforce have been ignored and not listened to. It is time that these voices are heard and privileged if the ECEC workforce is to meet the capacity and requirements of the various national, state and territory reforms.

In the recent budget, it was announced that workforce reform would be addressed through increases in the Child Care Subsidy (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2023). This measure is not enough to address the workforce issues as noted above. This does not address the issues of wages. There have been a number of peak bodies that have spoken out about this since the handing down of the budget:

Respondents include the [Australian Catholic University \(ACU\)](#), [Early Childhood Australia \(ECA\)](#), [The Early Learning and Care Council of Australia \(ELACCA\)](#), the [Community Child Care Association \(CCC\)](#), and [Community Early Learning Australia \(CELA\)](#), with the overall consensus being that while the Budget features several positive initiatives for the ECEC sector, more needs to be done to deliver better wages and professional recognition for early childhood educators. (The Sector, May 2023)

This is not addressing the issue of workforce supply being unable to meet demand. Rather, such a measure has the potential to add to this supply-demand issues as ‘child care’ becomes cheaper for more families leading to an increase in the number of families seeking ‘child care’. Whilst the budget included a wage rise for aged care workers (another sector with workforce issues) it did not include any wage rises for the ECEC workforce. In light of

the budget there have been calls for an immediate 10% wage increase for educators as an urgent measure to address what is a crisis in the making (Patten, 2023).

In the state of Victoria, where this submission is being lodged, the current government's "overhaul" of preschool remains threatened without addressing the workforce shortage being faced. Survey's conducted have repeatedly provided evidence that an estimated one in five early childhood educators are planning on leaving the profession within the next two years. Our own survey conducted in 2021 provided evidence that early childhood educators were experiencing statistically significant levels of stress and anxiety leading to an increase in the number of educators indicating their intent on leaving the profession (Henderson, Disney, Geng, & Bussey, in press). Other surveys have repeatedly found similar results, including United Workers Union survey of over 3,800 educators nation-wide where 63% surveyed said that one of the reasons they were thinking of leaving the profession was because of 'low pay' and that they were unable to 'afford to stay' (United Workers Union, 2021). **If educators cannot afford to stay in the profession then a serious solution must be cast over current ECEC reforms being proposed by National, state and territory governments.**

WORKFORCE PROFESSIONALISM

If wage reform is to take place, then there must also be a **genuine recognition of the ECEC workforce as a valuable profession**. It is not an 'industry' providing 'child care' to support the workforce, it is a profession. Educators are not 'child minders' they are educators and teachers. They are highly trained with both TAFE and Higher Education qualifications. Language is important and it is time that governments stop referring to the profession as 'child care' because what educators hear does impact their sense of identity, worth and accomplishments (Quinones, et al., 2021). Early Childhood Australia put out a release on the impact of language used to describe ECEC stating that how you talk about ECEC matters and that everyone has a role to play in the ongoing efforts to increase the

professional recognition of the workforce (ECA, 2021). Without this professional recognition wage reform is also unlikely to occur. It is through professional recognition that ECEC will be acknowledged as more than 'child care' to be seen for the pedagogy of care and education that is integral to the growth and learning of young children. Professional identity will then be raised and in turn, further professional growth of the ECEC workforce will be realised. It is through a **shared sense of a strong professional identity that professional growth will occur**. It cannot occur in the absence of this professional recognition.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we seek to put forward our concerns for the ECEC workforce and its ability to meet both capability and requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives. Wage reform is required that is in line with the professional recognition that early childhood educators deserve. Early childhood educators are not **childcare workers** providing a service to support the workforce. Rather they are **educators** who are professional and highly trained in relation to educating and caring for our youngest citizens of the nation.

Educators have shown strong commitment to children and families, that is demonstrated on a daily basis in early childhood centres around this nation and should be correspondingly valued, and publicly acknowledged. Children are not just 'dropped off' for child-care as if the work is little more than just looking after children as their parents work. Rather they understand what it means to develop learning programs that are child centred and child led. Early childhood educators understand *how* children develop and the *role of play* in learning. They understand how to support children's transition through routines and key milestones in their life. They support families as they turn to early childhood educators for advice and support throughout those early years. They are working tirelessly day after day educating and caring for the Nation's youngest children and deserve better.

Our hope is that this inquiry will take seriously these workforce issues and put in place measures that will address them and avoid the crisis facing the ECEC workforce.

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