



PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO A NATIONAL EDUCATION EVIDENCE BASE - 2016

A submission from United Voice
May 2016

United Voice, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) union represents early childhood directors, teachers and educators across Australia. We have members in every state and territory working in both large organisations and smaller centres. We are proud of the work we do – educating over one million young Australians and maximising the contribution their parents make to the economy. Together we work with all stakeholders including employers, sector advocates, peak bodies and parents to provide the best possible early education experience for Australian children and progress the agenda for a well-funded high quality ECEC system.



Authorised by Assistant National Secretary Helen Gibbons



Executive Summary

United Voice welcomes the opportunity to comment on the issues relating to data collection, data linkage, and data sharing as part of the Productivity Commission inquiry into the development of the National Education Evidence Base.

United Voice is supportive of any move towards evidence-based policy development. We hope that strengthened and linked data sets will result in the formulation of education policy that takes heed of existing and future evidence on aspects of quality, equity, affordability and accessibility of ECEC.

An evidence base that links data about an individual's early childhood education in terms of type, duration, dosage, and quality with their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, geographical characteristics, and their subsequent school performance and post-education outcomes provides a powerful and important tool for education policy development.

United Voice strongly recommends that the framework for the formulation of an education evidence base retains the notion of quality in its assessment of the relevance of different types of data. We also advocate for an education evidence base in the birth to 5 year old age group that considers the intersection of data on children, educators, and providers.

United Voice represents a workforce of close to 80,000 ECEC professionals working in long day care (LDC) throughout Australia. Centre-based long day care is the primary model for the delivery of ECEC nationally, and United Voice's members are integral to the provision of quality early learning opportunities to under-school-age children. Despite widespread recognition that educator qualifications, training, and working conditions are essential determinants of quality ECEC, insufficient data is collected about the ECEC workforce. Improving the data and research on the ECEC workforce should therefore be of central concern to this inquiry.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The scope of the education evidence base should be from birth.
2. Include within the scope children who access different models of approved ECEC, as well as those who do not access any.
3. Develop a national education data and research strategy with a focus on early childhood.
4. Develop a *National Early Childhood Development and Education Researchable Data Set* focused on attendance, quality and outcomes.
5. An independent body to govern the National Early Childhood Development and Education Researchable Data Set.
6. A new national birth cohort for longitudinal data collection and research.
7. Modifications to the education data collected should be subject to a greater level of scrutiny.
8. Create and maintain a robust ECEC workforce data set.
9. Better mapping of corporate ownership structures of ECEC providers.
10. Greater transparency regarding data and research used for early childhood policy development.

Recommendations

1. The scope of the education evidence base should be from birth.

Early learning in Australia is an integral component of Australia's education system. Today's educators and early childhood teachers are qualified professionals attuned to the successive developmental stages of 0 to 5 year olds. They are experienced in facilitating children's cognitive, social and emotional development in ways that provide a solid foundation to subsequent learning stages.

United Voice therefore strongly recommends that the scope of the evidence base includes data on children younger than 4 years old. Given that 85% of a child's brain development occurs between birth and five years of age, with brain malleability being highest prior to four years of age, it is vital that our education evidence base incorporate this early life stage.¹

2. Include within the scope children who access different models of approved ECEC, as well as those who do not access any.

United Voice supports the collection of data in a variety of ECEC provision settings including long day care (LDC) and family day care (FDC). It is also important to collect data on children who experience in-home care and those who do not access any non-parental education and care whatsoever.

United Voice recommends that the evidence base include data on the latter population so as to enable researchers and policymakers to compare and assess the impact of early learning interventions in relation to those who do not. Fundamentally, however, United Voice supports targeted access to affordable, high quality ECEC, and we note simultaneously that those children not accessing ECEC are very often socio-economically disadvantaged. We do not therefore promote any intentional creation or maintenance of a control group of children who are not presented with the appropriate early learning opportunities to which they are entitled.

3. Develop a national education data and research strategy with a focus on early childhood.

This dual data and research strategy will require cross-jurisdictional commitment from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, along with a commitment from different departments within jurisdictions.

This COAG-devised early childhood data and research strategy could begin by encompassing a range of areas where there is a recognised evidence gap including, but not limited to:

- Building an evidence base for 3 year olds in early learning.
- Building a stronger evidence base for the long term outcomes of quality teaching.
- Building a stronger evidence base for the relationship between attendance at ECEC, quality (structural and process), and outcomes. The outcomes measured could be potentially vast, and could also change over time. Any national data and research strategy must therefore be responsive.
- Research on dosage and duration.
- Robust data and research on the long term impacts of quality teaching in ECEC by linking early childhood data to later education outcomes and post-education outcomes.

¹ AIHW (2015) *Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Cat. No. CWS 53. Canberra.

Jurisdictional differences pose a significant barrier to the establishment of a consistent, linked, and accessible body of education data at a national level. As the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has highlighted in its report on the development of a National Early Childhood Development Researchable Data Set (NECD RDS), States and Territories do not all have the same capacity to collect and link education data, and have different privacy and legislative constraints and ethics committee requirements when it comes to releasing data.² These jurisdictional differences have thus far prevented the creation of a national data set.³ It is therefore clear that no national education evidence base that encompasses the early learning years from birth to 5 years will be achievable if the Commonwealth, States and Territories do not commit to standardising their data collection, and to permitting linking and sharing at a national level.

4. Develop a National Early Childhood Development and Education Researchable Data Set focused on attendance, quality and outcomes.

One aspect of the national education data and research strategy would involve developing a researchable data set based on that which was devised by the AIHW in 2014. In conjunction with the AIHW's model, the new national researchable data set should borrow elements from the Australian Longitudinal Learning Database (ALLD), including its proposal to link education data from birth through to post-education outcomes.⁵

The data set should link the existing relevant datasets such as the ABS, the AEDC, NAPLAN, LSAC, LSIC, ACECQA, Paid Parental Leave data, Family Tax Benefits data, maternal and child health data, National ECEC Workforce Census data, State-based long day care censuses, and administrative data from Medicare, child protection data, and other administrative data deemed relevant.

Consensus among stakeholders in early childhood from epidemiologists to social policy academics and child care services is that there is already a wealth of data collected in Australia. This data is not, however, adequately and comprehensively linked across jurisdictions and departments, which renders its use for research and policy purposes somewhat impractical. This has obviously been a missed opportunity that has hindered education research. Given the wealth of data sets already in existence, the financial cost of providing a good education evidence base across the lifecycle need not be prohibitive.

Existing data sets aside, there is scope to collect additional data to support the national education evidence base. This could involve strengthening current collection mechanisms, notably through more robust and uniform administrative data collection.

Administrative data collected from approved ECEC services should be broadened to encompass attendance and quality. Given that children attend ECEC from different ages, at different levels of regularity and intensity, and at services with differing quality ratings, it is necessary to broaden the scope of administrative data collected in relation to attendance, if we are to truly measure the impact of attendance and quality on education outcomes.

² AIHW (2014) *Developing the National Early Childhood Development Researchable Data Set*, Cat. No. PHE 179, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, p. ix.

³ AIHW (2014), p. ix.

⁴ AIHW (2014)

⁵ National Centre for Education and Training Statistics (2012) *Concept Paper: Australian Longitudinal Learning Database (ALLD)*. National Statistical Service. Accessible at: <http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/NSS/4FB1EC5C8DF5709BCA25784C000386C7?opendocument>

Many early childhood stakeholders have cited the obstacle that inconsistent nomenclature used in different States and Territories poses to the creation of a national data set. There is a need for a uniform vocabulary to describe early learning nationally, with agreed upon definitions of what constitutes a pre-school program, for instance. Like many other propositions for a strengthened national education evidence base, this will require COAG consultation and commitment.

5. An independent body to govern the National Early Childhood Development and Education Researchable Data Set.

This national agency would essentially act as a repository for the different sources of data in order to provide streamlined, searchable access. As an independent government-funded agency, it would be required to provide regular, publicly available reports to ensure accountability and responsive education and social policy.

Governance of the national early childhood education data set should be carefully considered in order to optimise its effectiveness. This independent agency should receive both Commonwealth and State and Territory funding in order to ensure joint buy-in. Governments should also commit to ensuring their respective departments and administrative bodies scrupulously and systematically share their data with the designated national body.

6. A new national birth cohort for longitudinal data collection and research.

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children has provided important information about various early childhood interventions. In particular, LSAC data has enabled several studies that measure the impact of ECEC. Using LSAC data, one of these studies has provided evidence of a causal relationship between pre-school attendance and improved better NAPLAN performance in Year 3.⁶ Another study has used LSAC data to shed light on quality ECEC's impact on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.⁷

There is, however, a need for more recent data that is relevant to the changed ECEC policy landscape, in particular since the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2012. With the current LSAC cohort having been of age to attend ECEC between 2004 and 2008, we are not able to measure accurately for the full impact of structural and process quality as stipulated in the NQF and EYLF on cognitive and socio-emotional development, both now and into the future.

If we do not invest in new birth cohorts, we will be compromising our capacity to create responsive, up-to-date evidence-based education policy that will allow Australia to mould the children of the day into intellectually, socially, and emotionally competent citizens. Perhaps more salient to the Productivity Commission's conceptual framework, a new LSAC that measures the impact of different ECEC interventions, will help to build the knowledge required to develop the cognitive and emotional skills and sensibilities that will be needed by the future workforce. Effectively, while United Voice chooses not to conceive of children as future taxpayers, we do recognise the long term economic enrichment that can flow from child-centred, high-quality early learning, and we see a place for research that seeks to measure ECEC inputs in terms of Australia's future economic performance.

⁶ Warren, Diana and John P. Haisken-DeNew (2013) *Early Bird Catches the Worm: The Causal Impact of Pre-School Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 National Naplan Cognitive Tests*. Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 34/13.

⁷ Gialamas, Angela, Murthy Mittinty, Michael Sawyer, Stephen Zubrick and John Lynch (2013) 'Child care quality and children's cognitive and socio-emotional development: an Australian longitudinal study', *Early Child Development and Care*, vol. 184, no. 7, pp. 977-997.

7. Modifications to the education data collected should be subject to a greater level of scrutiny.

United Voice is concerned that current data sets are vulnerable to ad hoc changes to collection mechanisms, which compromises the quality and consistency of the national early childhood education evidence base. We note that such changes have occurred without consultation with the relevant stakeholders in the ECEC research field.

For instance, the triennial National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census (NECECWC) that was conducted in 2010 and 2013 has been restricted in its third iteration in 2016.⁸ The Department of Education simply directed its contractor, the Social Research Centre, to pare back the Census so that only service directors, not educators, are surveyed. The resultant ECEC workforce survey that is to be conducted in May 2016 will fail to collect data on job satisfaction, intention to stay in the sector, career pathways and professional development, factors that have been identified as pertinent to the sustainability of the ECEC workforce and quality ECEC.⁹

Similarly, there are fears in the early childhood sector that the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), for which ongoing funding is not guaranteed, will be arbitrarily cut. The 2015 AEDC has yielded essential knowledge about areas such as the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable, and about decreasing rates of indigenous developmental vulnerability.¹⁰ United Voice supports the early childhood sector's call for future iterations of the AEDC to be carried out regularly and systematically.

8. Create and maintain a robust ECEC workforce data set.

While it is widely recognised that quality teachers are essential to quality education at every stage, national data collection on early childhood teachers and educators has frequently been inadequate.

That there are currently at least two Australian Research Council funded studies underway which identify the ECEC workforce as a primary factor in the delivery of quality early learning speaks to the recognition within the research community that this is a recognised field of inquiry in need of a stronger evidence base.¹¹

Indeed, this evidence insufficiency is hampering Australia's ability to measure its response to one of five essential quality ECEC policy levers identified by the OECD - *Improving qualifications, training and working conditions*.¹²

⁸ The NECECWC replaced previous surveys: the Australian Government Child Care Provider Survey and the Australian Government Census of Child Care Services.

⁹ Social Research Centre (2016) *Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census 2016 – List of main items collected as part of the data collection*. Accessible at: http://www.srcentre.com.au/docs/surveys/1555-ecwc-nwc-data-collection-items_r1.pdf?sfvrsn=0

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training (2016) *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015: A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia*. Accessible at: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>

¹¹ *Exemplary early childhood educators at work: a multi-level investigation* (2016-19) [United Voice is a party to this ARC linkage project];

Identifying effective strategies to grow and sustain a professional early years workforce study (QUT)

¹² OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III – A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

Accessible at:

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/startingstrongiii-aqualitytoolboxforearlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>

The data gap in this area also largely fails to provide the evidence base required to enable the recent COAG initiative, the Early Years Workforce Strategy 2012-2016, which identified five priority areas for achieving a “sustainable and highly qualified ECEC workforce”:¹³

1. A professional workforce
2. A growing workforce
3. A qualified workforce
4. A responsive workforce
5. A collaborative workforce

Currently, the triennial NECEWC provides most of the demographic data on the ECEC workforce and how the workforce numbers and qualification levels are matching NQF criteria¹⁴. As seen in recommendation 7, recent paring back of the scope of the workforce census will limit access to much-needed data.

At present, ECEC workforce data is far less detailed than the data available for school teachers. As a result, it does not capture a range of issues that have a significant bearing on educational outcomes including the impacts of casualisation, limited career paths and workforce turnover. There are also several policy relevant areas in which data is lacking for the ECEC workforce altogether, such as:

- The number of ECEC educators who are ‘deemed qualified’ by ACECQA, but are not formally qualified
- Data on ECTs who are driven to work with an older age group in schools, rather than an ECEC setting

Another key reason to expand workforce data collection relates to the Australian labour market and the growing demand for child care services. Indeed, the Department of Employment projects that over the five years to November 2020, there will be approximately 50,000 job openings in the ECEC sector, which poses the imperative of successful attraction and retention policy measures.¹⁵

While the Productivity Commission has previously recognised the “mismatch ... between the pay and conditions available in the sector on the one hand and the work skills and qualifications on the other”, there is no official data to measure the extent to which the low pay and conditions drive educators to exit the sector, and indeed at which rate they exit it.¹⁶ Furthermore, despite ample anecdotal reports of ECTs transferring from ECEC into the primary school system where the pay and conditions more accurately match their skills and qualifications, and of educators leaving the sector altogether, this effective brain drain, which threatens the services’ ongoing compliance with the NQF, remains largely unaccounted for in national data sets.

Attracting and retaining high quality educators and ECTs remains a problem that successive early learning and workforce participation policies have underestimated. United Voice and service providers regularly encounter workers leaving the sector citing the low pay and conditions as the reason. There is, however, no up-to-date data to indicate trends, which in turn prohibits accurate workforce projections and policy responses.

¹³ Department of Education and Training (2012) *Early Years Workforce Strategy*. Accessible at: <https://www.education.gov.au/early-years-workforce-strategy>

¹⁴ Department of Education and Training (2016) *2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census*. Accessible at: <https://www.education.gov.au/nationalworkforcecensus>

¹⁵ Australian Government / Department of Employment (2016) *Australian Jobs 2016*. Accessible at: <https://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/australian-jobs-2015-publication>

¹⁶ Productivity Commission (2011) *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Research Report, Melbourne, p. 5.

In sum, to foster a high quality education system at every age level we need to understand the differential ways in which working conditions are experienced across the ECEC and school-teaching workforce.

9. Better mapping of corporate ownership structures of ECEC providers.

There is presently no national process for capturing and publishing data about the corporate ownership structures of ECEC providers in the for-profit sector. While the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) gathers information about whether providers are for-profit, not-for-profit, or council-owned, it does not publish information about the corporate structures that substantively own individual providers.

It is not possible to determine, for instance, whether any particular provider is substantively owned by one of the ASX-listed companies, G8 or Affinity. The failure to collect and publish such information diminishes policy-makers' and parents' capacity to make informed decisions about various providers.

There are also powerful public interest arguments in favour of making such information public. The costs of any market failure in ECEC are not only borne by the children in those facilities and their families, but also by the taxpayer, as occurred when ABC Learning went into receivership in 2008. Such information is not resource-intensive to collect and report, and could be within the purview of the national regulator, ACECQA.

10. Greater transparency regarding data and research used for early childhood policy development.

This recommendation speaks to the political nature of evidence-based policy development, where the selection and the use of evidence can constitute a political exercise.

United Voice has previously expressed its concern for early childhood education government policy that is not informed by evidence, and for policy for which the evidence has not been made public. Most recently, in the context of the Australian Government's *Jobs for Families Child Care Package*, meaningful evidence, data and modelling was not released. This rendered a cost-benefit analysis of different reform options impossible for stakeholders from industry, academia, NGOs, peak bodies and unions. The fact that the government framed this policy as a workforce participation policy does not take away from the fact that it was also – and perhaps primarily – an ECEC policy.

We strongly recommend that evidence-based education policy be formulated in a manner that denotes transparency and scientific rigour.¹⁷

¹⁷ United Voice (2016) Submission to the Senate Inquiry on the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2015.

For more information on this submission, please contact Dr Miriam Thompson

Abbreviations

ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ALLD	Australian Longitudinal Learning Database
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECT	Early Childhood Teacher
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
LDC	Long Day Care
LSAC	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
LSIC	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
NECD RDS	National Early Childhood Development Researchable Data Set
NECECWC	National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census
NIA ECEC	National Information Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standard