

13 February 2024

**Feedback to the Productivity Commission Draft Report:
A path to universal early childhood education and care.**

THE Early Childhood Teacher Education Council (ECTEC) NSW/ACT is a network of course coordinators from universities and higher education institutions across NSW and the ACT, responsible for the initial teacher education programs for early childhood teachers. ECTEC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Report: A path to universal early childhood education and care.

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ECTEC's position is that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is viewed as a right of the child, not necessarily the right of the parent. While we support engagement in paid work for parents once children's access to affordable ECEC is implemented then this will support parental engagement in paid work, especially women. Therefore, we support the goal of universal access to quality ECEC for all children up to 3 days-30 hours per week. Having up to 3 days per week available of 'quality ECEC' for every child is a goal that needs achieving as soon as possible. Children in the early years require quality learning environments when in ECEC services. What happens in the early years impacts children's lifelong outcomes.

Currently not all children are able to access quality ECEC. Barriers relating to access include affordability, availability and the provision of quality ECEC even when access is available. Lack of access to ECEC can be related to ECEC being remote, regional and/or cultural. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC; 2022) highlights local government areas where children have commenced primary school showing vulnerabilities in 1-2 developmental areas. These can be mapped to groupings of Australians such as language diversity, children living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and children living remotely (AEDC, 2022). The Draft Report recommends expanding the availability of ECEC in these areas which we strongly support, and we recommend, in addition, that a community educational program for families be undertaken in these areas promoting the benefits of children's attendance at ECEC services.

Australia has a problem with the consistent provision of quality ECEC. As identified on page 13 of the Draft Report 'Government spends enormous amounts on ECEC- with little coordination.' This problem has arisen out persistent policy limitations which beg further inquiry focused on the quality of ECEC. Solutions to this problem require an interdisciplinary program of research involving investigation across education, health and brain research, economics and social impact to inform reviewed policy.

There are significant workforce staffing issues across ECEC contexts in Australia. This is the most important issue for the Productivity Commission to address. Without a well-qualified staff who are committed to their jobs in the ECEC sector, then the sector will continue to suffer from being unable to provide quality ECEC. The Australian Children's Education and

Care Quality Authority's (ACECQA; 2023) Workforce dashboard, shows that there has been a decline in graduates from Australian early childhood teacher programs, there is unmet demand for ECEC staff, and there has been a significant increase in approved waivers for qualified staff across Australia. This is of concern as it is known that the quality of ECEC is influenced by the quality of the workforce (Manning et al., 2019). Research has shown that work conditions and pay rates substantially influence the graduation rates of early childhood teachers (Boyd, 2020) and these are especially noticeable in areas of low socio-economic disadvantage, and some cultural communities.

As our focus is on providing quality initial teacher education programs and the supply, and retention of early childhood teachers and educators we make the following comments:

The following points are provided to support the ECEC educators to provide optimal learning experiences for children:

1. To support the supply of early childhood graduates, consider a reduction or elimination of HECS for degree study, waiving of fees for diplomas and certificates of ECEC, and pay students to undertake their professional experience placements;
2. A focus on provision of birth to five years' initial teacher education degrees may yield more qualified early childhood teachers as research has shown that students in 0-12 years' degrees (Boyd & Newman, 2019) usually opt to teach in primary teaching- these degrees are still a pathway 'out of the profession' so aptly penned in 2006 by Alison Elliott;
3. While we support a focus on provision of birth to five years' degrees; and we also propose that all state/territory accrediting bodies recognise Birth to 8 degrees in line with the internationally recognised definition of early childhood;
4. Keep early childhood educators in the workforce by recognising increased salaries, wages, work conditions and recognition;
5. Provide cleaners and administrative officers to ECEC services to reduce the workload of qualified educators to support children and families. This will go some way to addressing staff shortages, reduce attrition and make the profession more attractive. It will also reduce staff stress;

6. Recognise the complex needs of families and how this impacts educator workload. A reduction in educator workload would allow them to better support vulnerable children and families, especially those in regional, rural and remote communities. In these communities, access to health, mental health and allied health services is poor, so educators often give extra support, while families are on waiting lists;
7. Balance the workforce reality of ensuring high standards and provision of good quality by removing the measures that involve administrative procedures, that ECEC services feel they require to be accountable. Move towards a more pragmatic approach to assessment and rating that respect people's capacity;
8. Traineeships are an excellent pathway to being a qualified ECEC educator so long as the RTO provides a solid program that is delivered by suitably qualified staff, therefore, ensure delivery by reputable organisations;
9. Reduce the back-to-back waivers that ECEC services are obtaining for exemption of qualified staff. It is recognised that this is a workforce issue however the lack of qualified staff is less likely to occur in urban areas than regional and remote areas;
10. Fund educators to work remotely and fund wellbeing programs, including, peer support, mentoring programs, coaching and counselling for early childhood educators, in recognition of staff attrition, associated with burnout; and
11. We recommend that the Australian Government support provision of funding for permanent ECEC specialist academic positions, commensurate to increased enrolments. The casualisation of EC academics is really concerning, which this group has discussed before.
12. It is recommended that higher education institutions co-design the ECEC teacher programs to ensure that the program is 'fit for purpose' with early childhood teachers being prepared to effectively guide children's learning and development in the ECEC context (Fenech et al., 2021)

Additional information

The Productivity Commission's request for additional information, in some areas is included:

1. **Suitability of the National Quality Framework for Outside School Hours Care:** The NQF for OSHC needs to be removed from the ECEC sector. A separate entity needs to be established for administering the NQF in OSHC.
2. The proposal to include **Transition to school statements** in the ECEC sector should be put on hold until the ECEC workforce shortage has reduced and there are available staff to do this time-consuming work.
3. **Low rates of expansion among not-for-profit providers:** so long as the for-profit sector provides quality ECEC there is no reason for the not-for-profit providers to expand. One of the problems with running not-for-profit ECEC centres is that usually they are managed by a committee of volunteers- often parents, and usually women, who have never run an ECEC centre. This adds extra burden to women within our society who already more likely to carry the primary caregiver responsibilities and the heavier mental and physical load at home. In these situations, the Director of the ECEC centre needs to have outstanding communication and leadership skills to work effectively with the management committee for the good of the ECEC service. However, this is often fraught, as parents are unskilled in managing an ECEC centre.
4. **Develop an ECEC Commission:** we support the development of an ECEC Commission. This may have the effect of improving the reputation of ECEC in its own right and improve the status of the ECEC sector, subsequently attracting people to work in the area. An ECEC commission could have wide scope, including the oversight of the qualification of programs. Currently ACECQA has approval authority of accreditation of ECEC qualification programs, to a certain extent. However, they are also required to work with AITSL and the state/territory accrediting authorities whose standards are not built for the ECEC sector. This causes significant confusion across jurisdictions for whether a program of study can be registered in each state, thus enabling the graduate to be able to teach in ECEC. The national cultural competency framework to support

cultural safety for ATSI families and include within the framework considerations of cultural safety for our broader multicultural families.

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