

14 February 2024

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) is pleased to make this submission to the Productivity Commission.

ALNF was founded in 1999 to address the systemic inequity of access to speech, language and literacy services. It is dedicated to raising language, literacy and numeracy standards in Australia and raises funds to develop, implement and sustain innovative programs for individuals, families and communities.

These include the Early Language and Literacy Program (EL&L); Early Language and Literacy Development Index (ELLDI) and Living First Languages Program which offer opportunities to address a number of the findings and recommendations within the Productivity Commission's 2024 Report into Universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (the PC Report).

ALNF draws the Commissioners' attention to the importance of communication, oral language and other building blocks for literacy success; and the subsequent important impact on educational and broader life outcomes.

We offer scalable, evidence-informed and place-based solutions which would enable the provision of high-quality oral language, communication and early literacy learning to promote children's development and strengthen families.

We commend the Commissioners on the Report, and welcome their consideration of this submission.

FOCUSED ALNF PROGRAMS

This section provides information about selected ALNF Programs which offer opportunities to address the Commission's findings and recommendations.

EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY (EL&L) PROGRAM

ALNF's Early Language and Literacy Program (EL&L) aims to address intergenerational disadvantage and inequity through education for all children.

Research¹ has found that developmentally vulnerable and at-risk communities (as identified by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)) are those most likely to experience lower quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (as confirmed by the PC Report) and are also those most likely to have limited or no access to speech pathology services.

In 2018, ALNF commissioned the 'Overcoming Disadvantage in Childhood Study' (ODEC)², an independent evaluation by the Australian Council for Educational Research into the effectiveness of the EL&L Program on the NSW Mid-North Coast where it has been operating since 2008. The evaluation, led by Dr. Dan Cloney, included over 500 children in EL&L learning sites (intervention) and non-EL&L sites (control) and included the development of a novel formative assessment, the ELLDI (see below). The Final Report confirms that the EL&L Program has closed the oral language and early literacy learning gap for children in marginalised communities across a single year prior to commencing school.

"This is notable given the highly disadvantaged population who access the program – disadvantaged even relative to local community that is almost entirely in the lowest 25% of SES in Australia."³

Combining speech pathology and education principles consistent with the 'science of reading', EL&L includes practical, multisensory strategies which are easily integrated into existing play-based, curriculum and other pedagogical approaches *within the various services that children already access* to ensure that children gain a strong foundation in listening, speaking, reading, writing and comprehension so they are equipped to fully engage in education. EL&L supports the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Standards and National Literacy Learning Progressions.

¹McCormack, J. M., & Verdon, S. E. (2015). Mapping speech pathology services to developmentally vulnerable and at-risk communities using the Australian Early Development Census. *International Journal of speech-language pathology*, 17(3), 273-286.

Cloney, D, Cleveland, G, Hattie, J and Taylor, C. (2015). Variations in the Availability and Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care by Socioeconomic Status of Neighborhoods. *Early Education and Development*, 1 (1).

² Cloney, D., Picker, K., Jeffries, D., & Anderson, P. (2022). The Overcoming Disadvantage in Early Childhood Study: Evaluation of the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation's Early Language and Literacy Program. Final Report. Australian Council for Educational Research. (ODEC Report) Available at <https://alnf.org/2023/10/13/the-overcoming-disadvantage-in-early-childhood-study-evaluation-of-the-early-language-and-literacy-program/>.

³ Ibid, p117.

It is not a standalone program, but extends the existing knowledge and daily activities of learning sites, families and community members.

Over two decades, ALNF has worked at the community level to upskill and resource ECEC staff to help prepare children for school literacy learning; with the same approach in early primary so that teachers and support staff can address the needs of children that require support to catch up.

"It has truly been the most eye-opening professional development I think I have ever had. It has changed the way that I interact with children."

- ELC educator, Logan, Queensland

"Using the EL&L strategies has helped our children at our preschool embark on a journey of discovery of language and the importance of literacy in our world."

"The skills and techniques that I have learnt from doing the Certificate IV in Early Language and Literacy course through ALNF have helped me to teach and equip the children with the tools to develop their language and literacy development for life, and for that I am very grateful."

- Preschool educator, Latrobe Valley, Victoria

ALNF has successfully upskilled thousands of local educators (e.g., early childhood and primary teachers, Aboriginal Education Workers, Student Learning Support Officers and Teachers Aides), families and others in urban, regional and remote communities across Australia via its nationally accredited Certificate IV in Early Language and Literacy course and community workshops to achieve strong oral language and early literacy outcomes for children.

The Certificate IV course (11027NAT) includes four days of training, followed by workplace mentoring. It is complemented by the provision of highly practice and engaging, multisensory resources for use with children, and also parent/carer and community workshops.

This place-based approach has a tiered impact in that it benefits children and also adult community members, who improve their own knowledge, skills and confidence in English and also First Languages. In this way, ALNF supports communities so that they can be the drivers of intergenerational education success into the future.

EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT INDEX (ELLDI)

EL&L is complimented by the Early Language and Literacy Development Index (ELLDI). The digital ELLDI formative assessment has been designed to provide educators with valid, reliable and timely information about children's oral language and literacy growth (2 to 8 years). It is a world-first for the prior-to-school years.

The ELLDI progression scale provides a new capacity for insight into children's language and literacy growth at this highly sensitive age across 7 subdomains: phonological awareness; vocabulary; oral language (including fluency, volume and clarity); pre-writing and writing; reading; print awareness and comprehension. Numerous age-appropriate booklets allow for repeated ELLDI Interviews to provide ongoing insight into children's growth needs.

It also enables a strengths-based approach to children's learning. The ELLDI places children on a progression scale to provide rapid insight on children's growth and developmental needs, supporting educators with appropriate recommendations on learning strategies. It provides robust, statistically valid and reliable measures of children's progress to enable evidence-informed, reflective practice.

LIVING FIRST LANGUAGE PROGRAM

The goal of ALNF's Living First Languages Program is to see community driven and sustainable language and literacy teaching and learning flourishing in Australia's First Languages, supporting their intergenerational transmission.

Each iteration of the First Language Program shares a focus on strengthening Language, as well as language and literacy. Yet each project is different, to reflect the Culture, aspirations and circumstances of each community.

It combines a range of complementary place-based and digital activities, including:

- Community engagement and governance activities
- The Living First Languages Platform (the Platform) technology
- Certificate III in Coding Aboriginal Languages for Indigenous Literacy (CALIL).
- Certificate IV in Early Languages and Literacy (EL&L) Two Ways

Living First Languages Platform

Working alongside the community and complemented by face-to-face training, the Platform:

- Breaks down unique pronunciation and phonogram patterns of First Languages, supported by videos that demonstrate how sounds are formed in the mouth
- Showcases First Languages into sounds, syllables, words, and texts that can be seen, heard, and experienced
- Allows for rapid collection of multisensory First Language assets in written, audio, and visual form
- Records and plays back stories for teaching and learning purposes
- Provides the ability to view and hear all words, sentences and stories in First Language and English
- Includes an Elder approval process to maintain cultural integrity.

Community workshops and information sessions see families and community members develop language and literacy skills through processes of reflecting upon their Language and their priorities for teaching and learning in First Language/s, alongside English.

To see elements of the Platform, view a walk through here:

<https://youtu.be/7e4fruHDk1E>

Certificate III in Coding Aboriginal Languages for Indigenous Literacy (CALIL) – 11261NAT

CALIL fulfils the need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have their First Languages protected from incorrect pronunciations and generated into authentic language and literacy teaching resources.

Elders/Senior First Language speakers of the First Language/s provide advice and guidance as an Advisory Reference Group on First Language and Culture in relation to the resources developed during the course.

Pathways for CALIL graduates include further qualifications and employment in First Language work, including in educational settings, ranging from prior-to-school, school and post-secondary education settings, as well as broader community settings.⁴

Certificate IV in Early Languages and Literacy (EL&L) Two Ways – 11027NAT

The Certificate IV in EL&L is also offered 'Two Ways' in communities where Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Languages are the first home languages of residents of those communities.

The course includes the units of competency and EL&L strategies and resources contained in the English-only version, but additionally includes the development of EL&L

⁴ 11261NAT Certificate III in Coding Aboriginal Languages for Indigenous Literacy (CALIL) course document, February 2024, p3.

resources in the selected First Language, drawing on the knowledge of course participants as well as Elders and other Senior First Language Speakers.

The integration of EL&L strategies is undertaken in English and the First Language/s, with mentoring supported by EL&L Trainers as well as First Language experts.

ALNF RESPONSE TO SELECT DRAFT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHILDREN

The importance of communication and language

The PC Report rightly addresses the broad range of children’s developmental needs in the early years, and the importance of literacy for educational and later life success.

We draw the Commissioners’ attention to the importance of language and communication skills for social and emotional development as well as education. A child who cannot express themselves verbally will express themselves in other ways. Behavioural and mental health challenges are exacerbated, or on occasion caused, by a child’s attempts to express themselves and their needs, or their frustration or fear due to not being understood.

Children from marginalised and vulnerable communities are known to experience disproportionately higher challenges in early language and literacy development in the early years, not just at school. The ODEC Final Report notes:

‘A strong predictor of achievement and an important area of disparity between children from high and low SES backgrounds is early language and literacy development, where children from low SES homes have been identified as having lower language skills, apparent even in the early months of life (Hoff & Ribot, 2015). This disadvantage can be countered with quality ECEC intervention programs shown to enhance early language and literacy skills and promote school readiness (Chambers et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009)...for children to understand and learn the concepts and principles of print, which are foundational to reading, they require the systematic teaching of the components that lead to proficient reading. These components are drawn from extensive empirical research known as the ‘science of reading’, which advocates for the teaching of oral language, phonological awareness particularly phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension (listening and reading) and fluency (NICHD, 2000; Rose, 2006; Rowe, 2005).’⁵

⁵ Cloney et al, (2022), ODEC Final Report, p14.

The Grattan Institute's recent report states that "about one in three Australian school students are not mastering the reading skills they need." and advocates for phonics-based decoding skills in the early years based on the 'Science of Reading'.⁶

The Grattan Institute's focus is on reading instruction at school, which is of course important. However, laying the essential building blocks in the years prior to school is also vital.

It takes time for all children, and particularly vulnerable children, to mature and develop talking and listening skills along with understanding of early literacy concepts.

Children who start school without this maturity are at a disadvantage compared to their orally proficient and early literacy savvy peers. They are in 'catch up mode' from their earliest school days. Classroom reading instruction must either accommodate this developmental lag and/or additional resources need to be assigned to support this development.

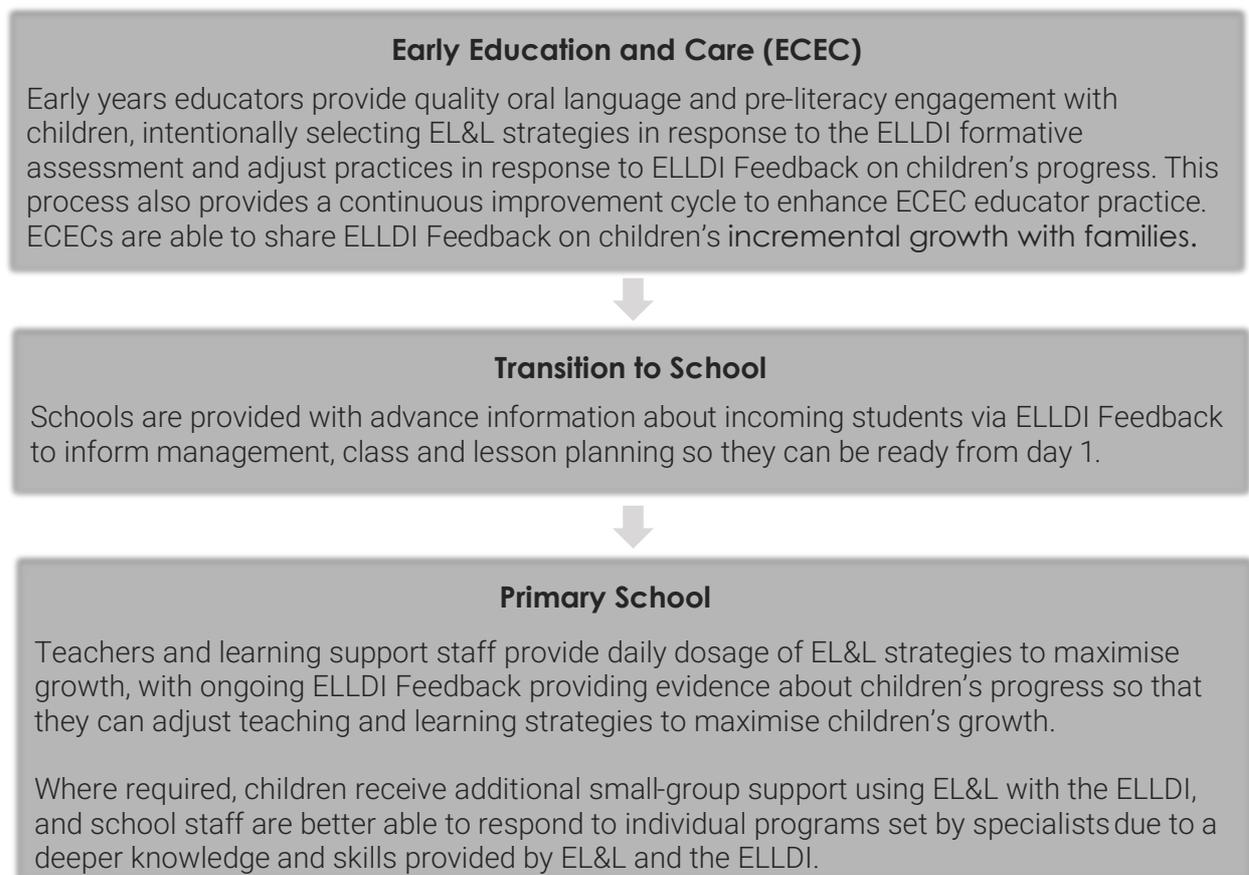
Providing support in the years before school for children to develop the prerequisite language and literacy growth ensures solid foundations for equitable, effective and efficient literacy instruction when children first enter schooling.

The PC Report notes the importance of the early years for children's neurological development, with "rapid development of language, self-regulation, and emotional competencies" and that ECEC is positioned to take advantage of this 'window of opportunity' and to address disparities for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage (p98).

The EL&L approach, paired with the ELLDI formative assessment, offers a scalable, evidence-informed and place-based solution for existing child and family services, including ECEC, to support children and families with children's oral language and early literacy development in the years prior to school, across the transition into school, and into the early years of school (refer Figure 1).

⁶ Hunter, J., Stobart, A. and Haywood, A. (2024) 'The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success.' The Grattan Institute, p3.

Figure 1: Vital oral language and early literacy learning across ECEC, Transitions, Primary School



Quality ECEC

Quality ECEC must be informed by the evidence of children’s developmental needs. This includes their communication, language and early literacy development.

Of course, evidence should be drawn from research, but it is also important that professionals and families can base decisions on evidence about individual children’s needs, as they evolve over time.

ALNF proposes a model (refer Figure 3) to rapidly expand the skilled hands on the ground to address Australian children’s oral language and early literacy growth in the critical early years, consistent with critical national policy objectives identified in the PC Report and the Australian Government’s 2023 Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, via:

- i. A **strengths-based focus** on children’s growth progressions from birth, throughout ECEC and spanning into the early years of primary school where required;

- ii. A **place-based approach** empowering local communities – those best placed to implement local child and family-centred approaches with respect for diversity and inclusivity for all cultures and languages, including First Nations;
- iii. **Breaking down silos** by facilitating knowledge exchanges between ECEC / primary / learning support and allied health sectors across the early years (refer Figure 4);
- iv. A professional learning model which leverages the **Educational Leader and EL&L champions within services consistent with ACECQA’s requirements**. This is a key element within a joint research study between the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and ALNF in 2023 (Final Report due in 2024);
- v. **Evidence-informed practice** across these sectors through:
 - Nationally accredited 11027NAT Certificate IV in Early Language and Literacy (EL&L) combines leading practices drawn from speech pathology and education.

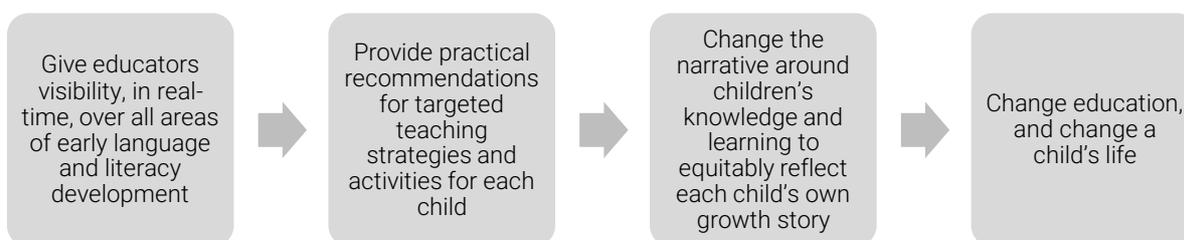
The Final Report of the ODEC Study by the Australian Council for Educational Research into the effectiveness of the EL&L Program affirms:

“Results reveal that children in the intervention group, receiving the EL&L program in preschool, went from being significantly behind the control group in their language and literacy at timepoint one (2018), to catching up at timepoint two (2019). This is despite the intervention children being from more disadvantaged backgrounds than the control group. Added to this, there were also more children with diagnosed disability or language delay in the intervention centres.”⁷

- The ELLDI formative assessment, a world-first in the years prior to school, provides robust, valid and reliable information about individual/groups of children’s oral language and early literacy growth progressions to inform learning approaches to maximise children’s development.

The approach is an example of genuine place-based, community capacity building where local community members are breaking the cycle of intergenerational educational disadvantage.

Figure 2: Creating quality communities of practice through EL&L and the ELLDI

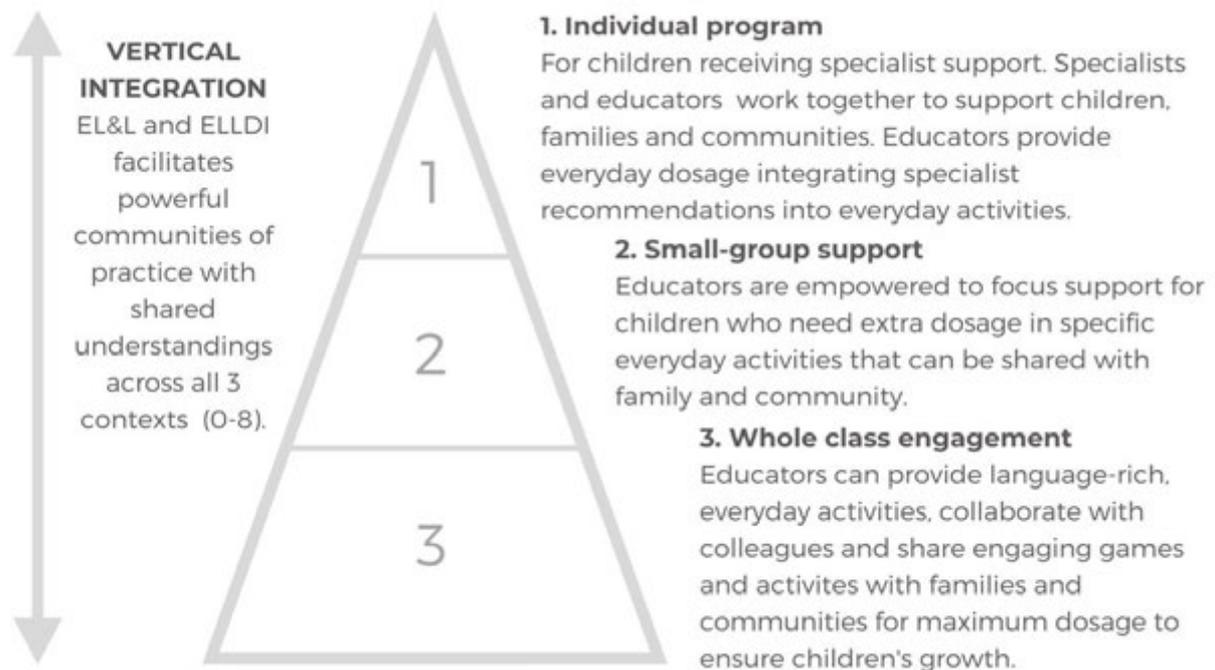


⁷ Cloney et al, (2022), ODEC Final Report, p105.

Figure 3: Systemic Change via Place-Based Oral Language and Literacy



Figure 4: Children at the Centre via Vertical Integration



INCLUSIVE, CULTURALLY SAFE AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE

Children and families need to be able to access services, and to feel welcome and safe in the services they access for their children. This is important in order to encourage engagement with services so that children and families can gain the maximum benefit.

Negative educational experiences in the early years, prior to school and in the early years of school, impact a child's confidence and attitude to school. It is important to build children's and families' confidence and engagement with education early to foster school attendance, completions and promote post-secondary education. When children have rich oral language exchanges within the family in their Home Language, and this is also experienced in their early learning settings, it increases their identity, confidence, and enables them to benefit from the rich neural development which occurs when children experience robust language exchanges.

First Nations Languages and cultural safety

First Nations communities prioritise the need for support to build their capability, resources and knowledge, particularly in developing teaching and learning resources that reflect their Language/s and Culture. It is important that communities have clear governance protocols when Language and Cultural materials are introduced within early childhood educational and community settings. Through its work, ALNF has witnessed first-hand the positive impact when communities develop quality digital and print resources for teaching and learning across multiple settings.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The EL&L Program encourages the use of Home Languages, consistent with the OECD's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goals 4.1.1a and 4.2.1. The Platform can also be adapted to include international languages to provide a learning space for children and families from those Speaker Groups and their educators.

Access and inclusion

The EL&L Program was expressly written to accommodate the learning needs of children experiencing chronic or intermittent hearing loss due to Otitis Media and/or ongoing auditory perceptual challenges. It has been successfully adopted in a number of Learning Support contexts. An example of this has been documented in a public primary school in Central Australia.⁸

⁸ Groom, S., Mendel, M-R., Brace, E. and Pryor, P. (2022) 'Evidence-informed early language and literacy practice: Implementation of a new formative assessment for early language and literacy development', ACER Research Conference. <https://doi.org/10.37517/978-1-74286-685-7-11>

ECEC WORKFORCE

ALNF witnesses daily the tremendous stressors on the ECEC workforce, and the worsening compounding elements experienced by staff and families. Children themselves have notable additional needs requiring thoughtful accommodations. We have observed an increase in the stress on both the ECEC sector and the needs of children and families since the Covid-19 pandemic. This is particularly the case in marginalised communities and in regional and remote Australia.

It is our observation that difficulties attracting and retaining staff, and insufficient numbers of skilled relief staff, both across the sector and at individual services, are resulting in:

- Increased pressure on existing staff resulting on stress and pressure to attend whilst unwell
- Negative impact on services' ability to release staff to participate in professional development
- Periodic closures or restrictions on child attendance due to an inability to meet ratios.

We propose several scalable and sustainable solutions to address these pressures utilising existing structures and workforces.

Student upskilling and deployment on practicums

EL&L with the ELLDI offers the potential to expand the available skilled ECEC workforce utilising existing infrastructure, extending workforces through the upskilling and deployment of student cohorts (refer Figure 4).

It involves equipping high school, VET/TAFE and tertiary students in education and allied health with speech pathology informed skills and knowledge drawn from the Certificate IV in Early Language and Literacy, to undertake practicums providing skilled practical support to stretched education staff, and enhance the quality of graduates feeding into these sectors. It is a sustainable and cost-effective model at the community level.

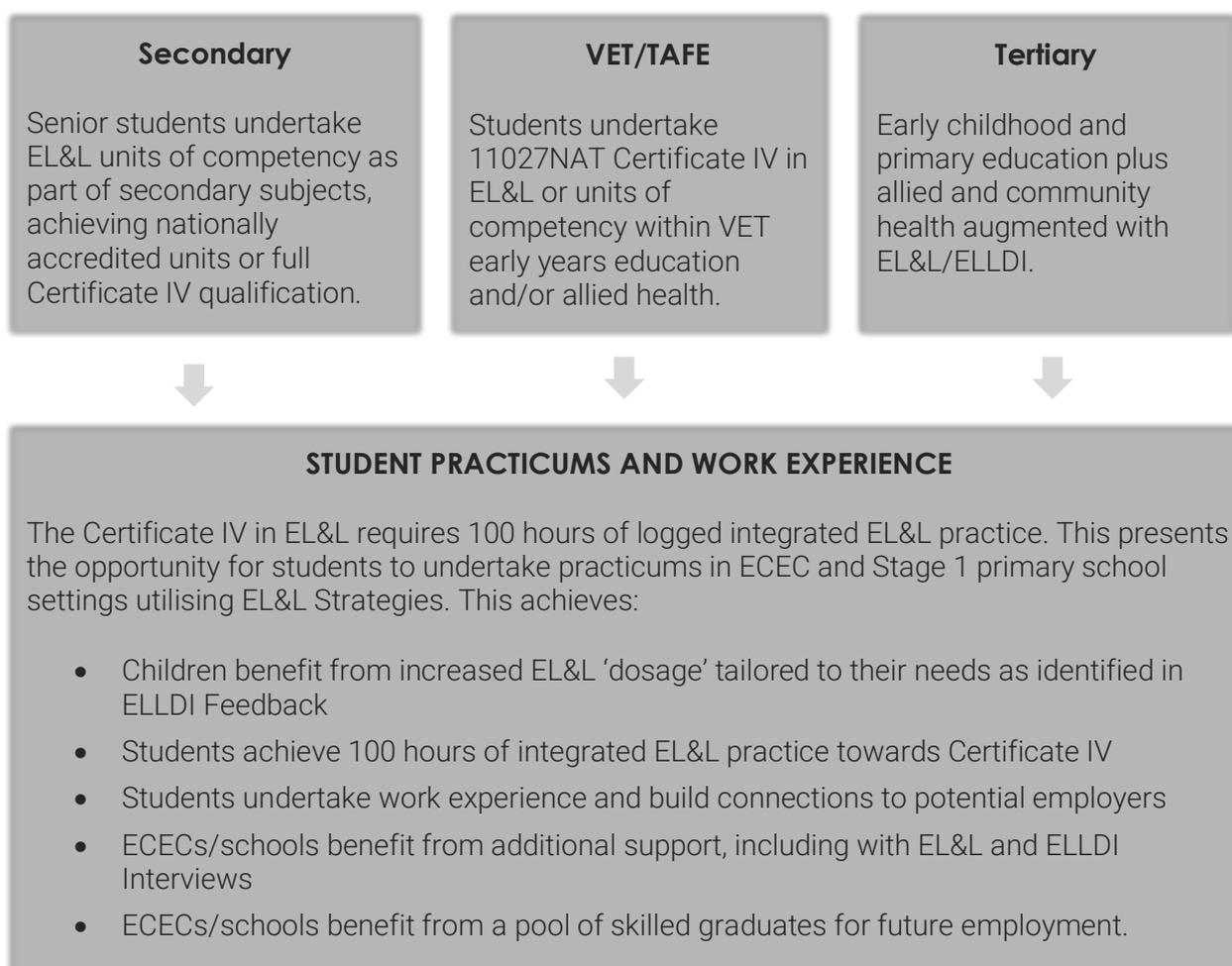
The six core units of competency in the Certificate IV in EL&L can be incorporated into secondary, TAFE and tertiary subjects/courses to provide students with skills and nationally recognised vocational competencies and/or the full qualification to be able to support children's vital pre-literacy development.

The Certificate IV requires the completion of 100 hours of integrated EL&L practice. Students undertaking EL&L within the context of their studies, can complete this practice in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and Stage 1 primary settings to provide a

much-needed supplement to the education workforce. This also provides students with important work experience and connections to facilitate employment after graduation.

In the context of calls for universal ECEC, including the NSW and Victorian Government announcements in 2022 regarding universal pre-kindy, this model provides a rapid workforce of pre-service students with the skills and knowledge to provide the regular dose of early language and literacy activities that children need, targeted to the individual and cohort growth needs as highlighted by the ELLDI. Further, students can support ECECs and primary schools in conducting the ELLDI Interviews (the formative assessment), enabling access to reliable and rapid information about children's development to support reflective practice, and relieving time pressures on stretched staff.

Figure 4: Secondary and Pre-Service Students Supporting Educators to Enhance Children's Vital Oral Language and Early Literacy Skills



Recognition and Professional Development

The PC Report notes the need to increase recognition of the ECEC sector. Enhancing the professional standing of ECEC staff requires qualifications and professional development opportunities, in addition to the more nebulous concepts of community respect and recognition.

It is also important that qualifications and professional development in this sector offer quality in that they are evidence-informed, and are provided in modalities which enhance the implementation of the skills and knowledge which are covered.

The ODEC Final Report notes,

“High-quality PD [professional development] programs have been shown to include essential characteristics such as situated practices that connect ‘what’ is being taught to the context for implementation, active learning experiences link to the ‘how’ by positioning educators as learners experiencing new instructional strategies in order to reflect on their effectiveness from a student’s perspective, as well as involving educators in sustainable activities that are cyclical and involve opportunities for enactment and reflection of practice (Borko et al., 2010). In addition, ... to increase the impact of PD, it has been shown that the combination of in-service PD programs and educator mentoring improves teacher instruction, with mentoring thought to be more effective when teachers receive PD aimed at developing their knowledge, skills and practices, followed by targeted mentoring (Kraft et al., 2018).”⁹

As noted above, the Certificate IV in EL&L course includes highly practical training which includes modelling, coaching and activities (vocational course assessments) on the use of multisensory, practical strategies for use with children as well as the ELLDI formative assessment. After the training, participants receive workplace mentoring to ensure competency and in particular fidelity to the EL&L strategies, integration of these strategies as appropriate to the learning setting and the needs of the attending children. A further requirement of the Certificate IV is the completion of 100 hours of logged integrated EL&L practice with children. This is supported by the workplace mentoring.

EL&L and the ELLDI also offer a clear path for **elevating existing workforces and improving retention** via professional learning with the 11027NAT Certificate IV in EL&L, with evidence-informed reflective practice supported by ELLDI formative assessments. The design of the course training and mentoring, and the integration of the ELLDI formative assessment, facilitates the confident and appropriate provision of quality oral

⁹ Cloney et al, (2022), ODEC Final Report, p15.

language and early literacy activities, integrated into everyday programming or curriculum and building on existing knowledge sets.

The inclusion of the ELLDI formative assessment in the EL&L Program is also critical for adults' professional development. It provides a rapid, robust and reliable feedback loop on which EL&L and learning activities are meeting children's needs, and which are not. In this way, adults are gaining deeper insights to be able to make informed decisions on how to advance children's oral language and early literacy growth. This is true for educators and other service providers, but also for parents/carers and other family members.

INTEGRATED SERVICES AND CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ECEC AND OTHER CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

We agree with the PC Report's call for greater integration between ECEC services and other child and family service providers, and for children and families to be at the centre. We also agree that ECEC services should be an important conduit for child and family referrals to other services where required. We also propose how this can be achieved in relation to oral language and early literacy. However, the PC Report also notes that not all children attend formal ECEC services.

Upskilling and resourcing early childhood health and education and other community services (e.g. libraries, playgroups) via EL&L with the ELLDI offers the opportunity to engage more children and families through their connections to varied services; increase children's learning activities ('dosage'); and provide families and local providers with information about individual children's evolving growth needs and development. The ELLDI also provides the opportunity for educators and families to identify potential candidates for referral to allied health services, enabling early intervention prior to children commencing school (refer Figure 5).

Such communities of practice can break down silos between education, health and community providers, to create connected services to the benefit of children and families. By building local providers' capabilities, the approach promotes consistency and sustainability, with knowledge embedded within the existing community structures. The resulting strong engagement with families and local community organisations is also supportive of more inclusive, culturally responsive and safe implementation.

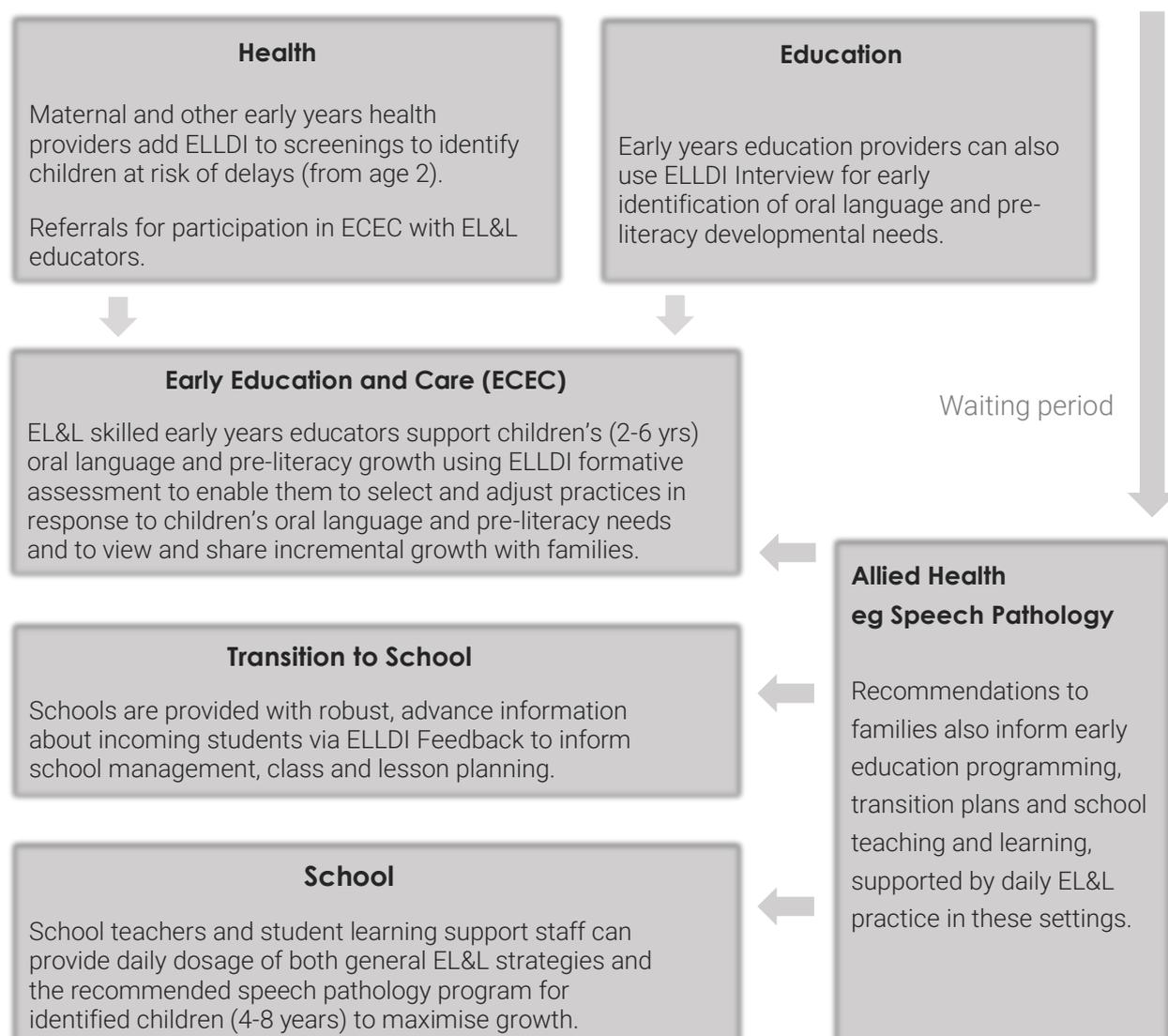
Creating opportunities for families to access EL&L workshops creates a common set of understandings and ways of talking about children that is strengths-based, and incorporates proactive engagement with appropriate games and activities shared across

home and external learning environments. This enables families to confidently communicate and participate in communities of practice as advocates for their children.

EL&L with the ELLDI offers the potential to achieve systemic change utilising existing structures, public assets and workforces (refer Figure 5). It is an efficient, effective and sustainable way of overcoming barriers for all children, irrespective of geographic location and socio-economic situation.

EL&L involves the in-servicing of existing workforces in the early childhood education, maternal/early childhood health and related sectors. As such, it offers the potential to break down silos between services to the benefit of children and families. By building local providers' capabilities, the approach promotes consistency and sustainability, as knowledge is embedded within the existing structures of the community.

Figure 5: Integrated Pathways to Early Identification and Action



LOCAL DATA TO INFORM LOCAL, JURISDICTIONAL DECISIONS

ELLDI Feedback can be viewed nationally, as well as at regional and state levels, to shine a light on trends to inform policy and planning decisions. It adds an informed quantitative data set in the prior-to-school years (from 2 years) to extend existing datasets from across the school years such as NAPLAN and final secondary examination results.

SUBMISSION

ALNF thanks the Commissioners for this opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Report into Universal Early Childhood Education and Care (2024).

This submission is lodged by Mary-Ruth Mendel on behalf of ALNF on 14 February 2024.

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Speech Pathologist (CPSP)