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The School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, within the Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), is pleased to submit this response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

QUT has a rich history in early childhood education, with more than 110 years preparing specialist early childhood teachers and leading transformational research to inform early childhood policy and practice. We offer a suite of early childhood initial teacher education programs, at both Bachelor and Master levels, preparing teachers to work with young children from birth to 8 years in prior-to-school ECEC settings and the early years of school (Prep to Year 3). We also offer postgraduate programs that address priority topics in early education (including educational leadership, First Nations education practices, trauma-aware education) and a range of research-informed professional learning programs for teachers and educators in ECEC settings.

We have a strong track record of interdisciplinary and collaborative research undertaken in close partnership with the sector. QUT is home to the Australian Research Council [Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child](#) dedicated to creating positive digital childhoods for all Australian children. QUT's [Centre for Child and Family Studies](#) draws together researchers with interdisciplinary expertise in childhood, parenting and the childhood workforce (educators, health professionals, community and other professionals), recognising the need for holistic approaches to support young children and their families.

This submission has been informed by our teaching, research and engagement in recent policy consultations in early childhood education and initial teacher education. We thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to provide input and would be delighted to provide further information on any of the points raised in this submission. Please contact lead author, Professor Susan Irvine, Head of the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education

## **General Comments**

Underpinning the more detailed points raised below is our shared conviction that all young Australian children and their families have the right to access high quality, inclusive ECEC services that promote early learning, support effective parenting and enable family workforce participation. This proposition enjoys widespread public endorsement as well as considerable policy support for better social, economic, individual and family outcomes.

We conceptualise ECEC as the continuum of early education settings catering for young children from birth to eight years, spanning prior-to-school ECEC, the early years of school (Foundation to Year 3) and the transition between these settings. Mindful of the scope of this inquiry, we have concentrated our responses on the prior-to-school ECEC sector.

We commend the policy focus on supporting affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development. Recognising the contribution of these services to national educational, social and economic goals, we believe that ensuring access to high-quality ECEC requires the same focus and investment as school education and requires a long-term strategy and bi-partisan support.

In developing this submission, we have addressed key topics identified in the scope of the inquiry.

## **Specific comments**

### **(1) Access to quality ECEC services**

There is growing international recognition of the contribution of high-quality inclusive ECEC to children's learning, development and wellbeing in the immediate and longer-term (OECD, 2018), and, related to this, recognition that a universal platform of ECEC services is the cornerstone of an effective contemporary education system.

We commend current state initiatives and investment to expand access to two years of universal preschool prior to school entry, in particular, the New South Wales and Victorian commitment to 30 hours a week of play-based learning for all four-year-old children, and universal preschool for three-year-old children in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. We also applaud the supporting policy focus on development of the ECEC workforce, including a range of funded scholarships and incentives alongside increased access to quality mentoring and professional learning opportunities.

However, there is urgent need to address growing disparity in access and provision across Australian states and territories. This Inquiry presents a timely opportunity to learn from these initiatives, and to leverage findings from the South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC (South Australian Government, April 2023) to advance a national approach to support two years of universal preschool for all Australian children. We see this as the first essential step towards the national vision that all children, irrespective of where they live and the circumstances in which they live, enjoy equitable opportunities to learn, grow, develop and thrive in order to reach their full potential (Australian Government, 2023).

## **Recommendations**

- Implementation of a national approach to provide access to two years of universal preschool prior to school entry for all Australian children.
- Funding to support the right of very young children (birth to 3 years) to access high-quality ECEC, and to ensure this is not determined by their parents' work and/or financial status.
- Complementing universal ECEC services, further investment in additional place-based, evidence-informed and locally relevant services and supports that offer more targeted and intensive support for diverse children, families and communities (Richter et al. 2017).
- Funding of initiatives to build deep and long-term partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to promote and strengthen cultural safety and responsiveness in ECEC.

## **(2) Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school**

As defined within the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2023), there are many contributors to quality and learning in ECEC. However, without doubt, the critical determinant is the educator designing and delivering the education and care program. Educators' responsive relationships and positive and meaningful interactions with children are recognised to be the most potent influence in predicting children's ongoing learning, development and wellbeing (OECD, 2018; Ulferts et al., 2019).

The success of the ECEC reform agenda in Australia is dependent upon there being a qualified and skilled workforce (ACECQA, 2021, OECD, 2019) whose practice is informed by a strong sense of purpose, professional body of knowledge and autonomy in practice (Irvine et al. under review). Acknowledging the professional work and contribution of all educators,

our focus here is early childhood teachers in prior-to-school ECEC settings, with particular attention to qualifications, career pathways and early childhood curriculum and pedagogy.

### ***Qualifications and career pathways***

At present there are a range of 'approved' early childhood teacher qualifications (ACECQA, 2023), spanning different age groups (i.e., birth to 8 years; birth to 12 years; birth to 5 years), supporting different employment outcomes and career pathways in education.

QUT's early childhood teacher education programs cover the age range birth to 8 years, preparing specialist early childhood teachers who are knowledgeable in child development, early years curriculum and pedagogy, and working with families to teach in prior-to-school ECEC settings and the early years of school. There are several drivers that underpin this conceptualisation of ECEC, including the importance of employing early childhood teachers in both settings, building a shared knowledge base to promote continuity of learning and successful transition to school, and optimising employment and career pathways.

Other programs are designed to prepare teachers to work with children birth to 12 years (with a strong primary focus) and more recently, to work with children birth to 5 years in prior-to-school ECEC settings (only). While we question the capacity for in-depth coverage of early childhood studies in a birth to 12 program, we support recognition and registration of early childhood teachers who have completed a four-year birth to 5 degree, alongside those who have completed the birth to 8 degree.

To ensure equity and the best outcomes for children, teachers and the profession, we offer the following perspectives to inform policy and practice going forward.

- Teaching is complex professional work and all children have the right to well qualified teachers, regardless of age or education setting.
- There is opportunity to strengthen current articulation pathways from Vocational Education and Training into Higher Education, and, in doing so, make visible current qualification and career pathways in ECEC (Nutbrown, 2021).
- There are accelerated and employment-based teacher education programs worthy of further exploration, bearing in mind these can place additional pressure on students and do not suit all candidates.

- To enhance professional recognition, pay and conditions, and community perceptions and value of teachers in prior to school ECEC (ACECQA, 2021), we need **one strong teaching profession** (Education Services Australia, 2018). We see strength in a united focus on the teaching profession that recognises and supports all teachers regardless of the age of learners or the education setting, and that enables multiple career pathways and equitable opportunities for career progression.
- Initial teacher education is the entry point to a career teaching in ECEC, and one element of the ongoing professional journey of a teacher. While formal qualifications are essential, we believe the acquisition of knowledge and skill, and the formation of professional identity are ongoing (Wijnen-Meijer et al. 2020). All teachers need equitable access to quality mentoring and ongoing professional learning. We draw attention to the successful *From the Ground Up* leadership development program, led by QUT in partnership with the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia (ELACCA).

Higher educator qualifications are strongly associated with improved practice and positive child outcomes. We do not support any move to lower early childhood teacher qualifications, and we are concerned about the emergence of three-year teacher education programs (birth to 5 years) in some states. While this policy shift responds to immediate need, there is high potential for it to have a negative impact on current workforce priorities (Education Services Australia, 2022), in particular, professional recognition, remuneration and career pathways in ECEC in the immediate and longer-term. At present, employment options for three-year qualified early childhood teachers are restricted, and there are limited pathways that will enable these teachers to upgrade their qualification to a four-year degree. We need to ensure that in searching for immediate solutions, we do not inadvertently create a second tier or class of teachers working in ECEC.

## **Recommendations**

- Preferencing of early childhood teacher education programs that cover the age range birth to 8 and birth to 5 years with access to teacher registration for graduates.
- Promotion of one teaching profession. There should be no reduction in qualification requirements for early childhood teachers.

## **Early childhood curriculum and pedagogy**

Australia's two Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFs) – *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*; and *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care* have a critical role to play in informing and supporting the professional work of early childhood teachers and educators in ECEC.

The recent ALFs update project (2021-2022) resulted in changes to both frameworks, for example: a new vision for children's learning, including recognition of the role of ECEC in advancing reconciliation; a strengthened focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives throughout the frameworks; some new and updated principles; expanded explanations of some pedagogical practices; and strengthened guidance to support the learning outcomes. The updated ALFs were endorsed by the Education Ministers Meeting in December 2022, with a view to implementation from 2024.

While implementation ultimately rests with approved providers and educators, government has a leadership role to play here. The updated ALFs provide impetus and opportunity to strengthen professional learning and practice across the nation, by funding access to a range of quality evidence-informed professional learning programs and resources addressing key areas of change.

### **Recommendation**

- Funding for a suite of quality evidence-informed professional learning programs and resources to support implementation of the updated ALFs (2.0), with priority given to strengthening knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, languages and perspectives, and creating inclusive learning environments.

### **(3) ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.**

The extent and nature of current workforce challenges in ECEC is documented in *Shaping our Future: Ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable high-quality children's education and care workforce* (ACECQA, 2021), and have also been recognised in the Interim Report of the South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC (South Australian Government, April 2023). The majority of these challenges are neither new nor limited to the Australian ECEC

context. They include ongoing difficulties associated with lower wages and contested professional status (Phillips et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2020), unmet qualification standards, high turnover and skill loss (McDonald et al. 2018).

We commend the development of a ten-year national workforce strategy, the co-design approach led by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) involving all governments working with a Stakeholder Reference Group, and the six focus areas. Without doubt, the most pressing is Focus Area 1: Professional recognition including pay and conditions, registration and community perceptions and value.

Focussing on centre-based ECEC, the vast majority of educators continue to be employed on an award basis, which contrasts unfavourably with better paid and less challenging sources of employment outside of ECEC, explaining turnover rates as high as 30% (McDonald et al. 2018). There also continues to be considerable variation in the wages and conditions of early childhood teachers, based on work context. While applauding changes to the Fair Work Act to address gender pay equity, recent award increases and moves towards pay parity with preschools and schools in some ECEC organisations (e.g., Goodstart Early Learning) and services, there is urgent need to strengthen parity across the ECEC sector. There is clear market failure here that urgently requires government-led intervention.

While increasing wages and improving conditions are the top priorities, we also endorse proposed strategies to enhance professional recognition, within the profession and the community. We strongly support an expanded approach to teacher registration (Education Services of Australia, 2018), led by local Teacher Regulatory Authorities, that is inclusive of all teachers who have completed a four-year early childhood teaching degree, regardless of the age of learners or their chosen education context. We also support the proposal to develop options for a national registration system for educators who are not trained teachers.

Retention of quality teachers is a crucial part of elevating the teaching profession, at all points across the education continuum. This includes visible career pathways, equitable access to mentoring and continued professional learning, and enhanced opportunities for all registered teachers to gain recognition and career progression through the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) accreditation process.

## Recommendations

- Australian Government participation and funding assistance (e.g., direct conditional wage subsidies) to support a nationally coordinated Multiple Employer Agreement across the early childhood sector to deliver wages and conditions commensurate with colleagues working in other areas of education.
- Expanded teacher registration that enables all early childhood teachers who have completed a four-year teaching degree to become fully registered teachers.
- Enabling registered early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings access and support to achieve recognition as highly accomplished and lead teachers.

### **(4) Required regulatory settings.**

Australia's track record in regulation and quality assurance in ECEC is to be celebrated. We implemented the world's first national *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System* (QIAS) in 1993 and have more than three decades of experience in national standards and quality assurance in ECEC. Our current National Quality Framework leverages this experience.

Drawing on findings from the recent OECD policy review entitled *Quality beyond regulations* (2018-2022), the NQF provides an exemplar of an effective and contemporary quality assurance and improvement system in ECEC, characterised by close alignment with the OECD 'policy pointers' to inform effective regulation and quality assurance. The NQF:

- provides a comprehensive and coherent framework that addresses all ECEC services (noting continuation of a small group of out-of-scope services);
- promotes shared understanding of the National Quality Standards (NQS), with a strengthened focus on process quality (i.e., relationships, interactions and experiences in ECEC);
- promotes self-evaluation and a culture of continuous quality improvement;
- optimises the use of data to improve quality (with live access to NQS data); and
- seeks to strengthen the voices of parents and children in quality assurance processes (OECD 2022, 3-4; Irvine et al. under review).

In addition, the NQS:

- is informed by contemporary theory, research and practice wisdom;

- promotes the importance of early learning, supported by two contemporary Approved Learning Frameworks;
- makes visible the professional nature of educators' work in ECEC and enables their autonomy and agency in practice; and
- applies performance standards that enable different ways of working in diverse ECEC services and communities (Irvine & Price, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Siraj et al. 2019; Thorpe et al. 2022).

Our assessment is that the NQF is fit for purpose, and has been effective in driving continuous quality improvement in ECEC over the last decade (Harrison et al. 2019).

## Recommendations

- Continued funding for the ACECQA to lead the NQF, working in partnership with Australian, state and territory governments.
- Continued commitment to review and update the NQF and related policy levers in consultation with the ECEC sector.
- Ensuring adequate state and territory resourcing of regulatory functions to enable meaningful engagement in the NQS assessment and rating process, recognising the impact of constructive feedback and the A&R report on quality improvement in ECEC (Harrison et al., 2019).

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