

18 May, 2023

The Commissioners
Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care
The Australian Government Productivity Commission

Via email: childhood@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners,

We write to you as members of the Early Childhood Education Services staff at The University of Melbourne. We deliver long day care and funded kindergarten services to families of the University and the local community, and amongst our staffing group have extensive lived experience that we would like to share with you as you consider your inquiry.

We are also pleased to know that our colleagues in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education's Research Centre in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) will also be making a submission, and that their research and evidence of 'what works' matches broadly with our views of what needs to happen next across our sector.

1. Across Australia, Early Childhood Educators need wages that reflect the skills and experience of the workforce, the educational value of their work, and the economic contribution they support.

As educators with professional networks across the sector, we are deeply aware that there are some significant challenges here.

At the University of Melbourne, we benefit from the salary rates and employment conditions that are set to a level above that typically found in the community sector, and it is our experience that colleagues across the sector are not being paid a fair or reasonable wage for the work they are undertaking. This impacts these staff in multiple ways:

- We have colleagues who prior to joining the University were never paid to attend after-hours staff meeting; they were expected to do so without pay
- Professional development and career progression are significantly limited by the practical (and often hidden) expenses involved; across the sector staff undertaking further study that includes a practicum often need to fund this time away from work themselves, typically via personal savings (see Recommendation #2)
- This drives a practical choice, where professionals committed to a career in Early Childhood are forced towards careers in other sectors that are not aligned to their passions and interests (consider the number of educators moving to a career in Policing, simply for the greater job security and wages it offers)

Somehow, Australia has enabled a failure of supply and demand, where there is currently an employment market that is desperate for skilled and passionate Educators, and yet many

employers are not able to offer – and many staff are not receiving – a wage that reflects this scarcity of skilled talent.

In our discussions with families, the cost burden that they face to attend their service is very significant, and yet still there is not a full and clear recognition of the true cost required to allow centres across the country to pay educators a fair wage.

Recommendation #1: Support increases to the Award that recognise the skills, qualifications and value of the early childhood workforce.

2. Early childhood educators face too many practical hurdles in developing their professional qualifications and careers.

In our experience, early childhood educators looking to build their qualifications and career are required to undertake a qualification that includes an unpaid placement, which requires those who are working to take time off work, typically as leave without pay or, in part, via annual leave.

A 12-week placement is a critical element of these courses, yet it would take many educators at least a year of careful savings to have the money required to fund this experience. A further hurdle is the practice of many training providers and employers to not allow staff to undertake these placements in their place of employment, which then requires the educator to either find a training provider and employer that will allow this or take the time to save the funds needed.

Australia has a strong set of professional frameworks and regulations that guide professional education on paper, however our peers across the sector often share experiences that demonstrate the disconnects between the ways these education and training programs are regulated and offered, and the student experience. If you are fortunate enough to work in an environment that supports your ongoing development and growth, it can be a wonderful, life changing experience. However, there are many educators who describe environments and experiences that do not reflect these requirements in practice.

On paper, rating and assessment procedures are intended to pick these items up, but the lived experience of many staff across the sector is that this is not the case in practice. There is also a trend for experienced educators to leave their Centre and seek employment in the training and development sector, working to train new educators, simply for the job security and benefits offered, and not because this is where their passion lies.

It is also noteworthy that Mentors (or, in some cases, their Centres) are compensated / paid for their work supervising students undertaking their placement (which is entirely appropriate), but the student is not, and is almost certainly unable to undertake any paid work during their placement due to the intensive requirements of that experience.

As a sector, ongoing professional learning is critical, and while the qualifications are often high quality and very low-cost or free, the practical hurdles and costs of time away from work make them prohibitively expensive.

Recommendation #2: Fund and enable the ongoing professional development of educators in a way that doesn't require them to save for years in advance, or rely on the charity of others to enable the required time away from work.

3. Support all families with full and proper paid parental leave.

There is overwhelming evidence of the benefits to a child if their first 12 months are well-supported and nurtured, and that parents are the best people to do this.

At the University of Melbourne, we are fortunate to receive generous parental leave benefits that are not available across the sector, and we are deeply aware of our peers and colleagues across the sector who, through a lack of government and employer support for parental leave are unable to spend this critical time with their own family.

Instead, they often must find a suitable care arrangement for their own children and spend this precious time providing care and education to the children of others.

Colleagues across the sector are often sharing their stories of needing to return to work within 6 months, because there is no financial support available to them to take more time to be with their family. They need to work, and are expected to do an outstanding job, despite working in the knowledge that their own child is in another centre elsewhere, missing out on the benefits of their own personal care and attention, knowledge and expertise. It is a dynamic that plays on many educators' physical and mental health and wellbeing.

While there are, of course, some who will elect to return to work sooner, enabling the option of 12 months of paid parental leave will benefit so many families in multiple ways. This includes the known benefits of supporting new parents to be with their own children, but also through relieving the significant demand and supply challenge many families face in trying to find and secure care for a child under 12 months of age.

Recommendation #3: Increase the current minimum national standards for paid parental leave to 12 months

4. Make early childhood education more accessible through investing in the national ECES workforce.

The experience of families needing to register for a place with their preferred early childhood service before their child is even born is far too common. It is so competitive to get a place, and so valued by families.

It is our view that improving access to early childhood services is a national priority, for both educational and economic reasons, however these improvements in access must not come at the detriment of the early childhood workforce.

Central to this is ensuring that staff have access to good, stable employment and as described earlier in our submission, an enriching and rewarding career path.

The current level of casualisation across the Early Childhood workforce nationally is a significant disincentive for many educators to continue to progress their chosen profession. While secure, continuing employment is a feature of working in ECES at the University of Melbourne, we are deeply aware of the fact that many of our peers across the sector are not so fortunate.

In addition to job security, the availability of part-time return to work arrangements following parental leave is a critical enabler in ensuring that educators are supported and encouraged to re-join the workforce and progress their careers in early childhood. Too many educators in this situation are sharing their stories across the sector on how this option is not available to them.

We would also like to note the current configuration of staff:child ratios, particularly for roles working with very young children. The 1:4 ratio that is in place makes these roles especially challenging – it's a regular comment for many educators across the sector to hear, that families cannot imagine how educators can consistently work so professionally with 4 children in their care, all day, day after day. Imagine their shock if they were also to realise that in many settings their educator is typically diploma qualified and are taking home as little as \$27/hour.

Recommendation #4: Enable additional investment in the ECES workforce, through ensuring high levels of job security and that part-time flexibility is offered to educators returning from parental leave. We also recommend a review of the staff:child ratios in settings working with very young children, to recognise the significant demands of this work.

5. A lack of knowledge about entitlements and rights at work means many are missing out.

We are very fortunate in our workplace to have a culture where staff are well informed of their entitlements and their rights at work. However, it is very common for us to hear from colleagues across the sector who just don't know what the regulations and legislation entitle them to in the workplace, and how often they are missing out, or being treated unfairly by their employer as a result.

Through a lack of options, we've seen educators from settings across Australia turn to social media to try and get the advice and support that they need.

Workplace induction for many staff are often described as being done in a way that doesn't support staff to know what a healthy workplace look like, and many educators report taking on duties that normalise bad practice.

Recommendation #5: Following the lead of campaigns supporting workers in other sectors, such as retail and hospitality, support staff working in ECES across Australia to understand the key details in the relevant regulations, workplace policies, and in their employment contracts. This might be achieved through a campaign, or an investment in a professional development module for educators nationwide.

6. Rebrand the ECES sector with the Australian public.

The leap in expectations amongst families as they move from childcare to kindergarten to school is mismatched with the research that tells us the value of quality education in the very early years. We experience this regularly: families are focusing their attention on their child's education in the wrong places at the wrong time and we need to correct this.

We need to reset families' expectations of what effective early childhood education looks like on a day-to-day basis and support them to understand the importance of high quality ECE delivered by well qualified and professional educators. It is disheartening for many educators to continually encounter such low expectations of 'childcare' and 'child minding', which often reflects a lack of understanding of educators' qualifications and skills.

The Government could seek to address this, for example, through a campaign that promotes the value of the early childhood education sector and shifts terminology away from 'childcare worker' towards 'educator' and 'teacher'.

Recommendation #6: Run a focused campaign promoting the value and contribution of the early childhood education and care sector needs to be shared nationally, recognising the qualifications and skills of this workforce and the valuable contribution educators make in these critical early years.

Thank you for the chance to share our views on the items being covered during your inquiry, and we look forward to seeing your report and recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

Netty Merewether, Adam Taylor-Bush & colleagues
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