

**The Institute of Early Childhood**

The Institute of Early Childhood is a multidisciplinary department within the Faculty of Human Sciences at Macquarie University. The department includes specialist academic staff in areas such as early childhood education, leadership and management, psychology, linguistics, sociology, creative arts, difference and disability. For more than 100 years, the Institute of Early Childhood has been a major provider of early childhood teacher education and currently offers undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs, and high degrees by research.

This Submission

This submission on future options for childcare and early childhood learning focuses specifically on *quality early childhood education and the critical importance of early childhood teachers*. The Institute of Early Childhood requests that when the Commission makes its recommendations, the following agenda for supporting high quality early childhood education in Australia is considered in each of its six areas of the inquiry.

1. High quality ECE matters

It is imperative that the Australian Government develop and implement a policy trajectory that will meet COAG's goal of giving all children the best possible start in life (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). With over one million children attending formal early childhood education (ECE) settings (Productivity Commission, 2013) it is critical that these services be of high quality. As is well documented in the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper, a strong evidence base from neuroscience, social science and econometric research unequivocally demonstrates that when formal ECE is of high quality, developmental outcomes for children are enhanced and families' wellbeing is promoted. High quality ECE also ameliorates social disadvantage, facilitates women's workforce participation, and fosters social inclusion (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). Additionally, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child it is incumbent on the Australian Government to develop ECE policy that is grounded in the rights and best interests of young children. In sum, the Australian Government's investing in ECE as a means to achieving economic, education and social policy goals, as well as meeting its international legal obligations, is contingent on a sector that is supported by government to deliver high quality early learning experiences for young children.

2. Policy reforms need to facilitate/support high quality ECE contributors, in particular teacher-qualified leaders and educators

Contributors to high quality ECE are either amenable to regulation (e.g., low staff:child ratios, small group sizes, qualified (especially university teacher qualified) staff or, we would argue, fall under the remit of broader ECE policy (e.g. improving wages and working conditions to ensure low staff turnover and pay parity for teachers; strong governance and leadership). It is critical that the Australian Government policy addresses both sets of contributors. In this section we would like to focus on teacher qualified leaders and staff.



Teacher-qualified leaders

Teacher and educator qualification requirements in the NQS are indicative of a bottom up approach by COAG to lift quality standards and practices. Initiatives have sought to ensure that teacher requirements aside, by 2014 all other staff will have (or be actively working towards) either a Certificate III or a Diploma in Children's Services qualification. New teacher requirements of one teacher in every service licensed for 25 children or more is an improvement in some but not all states.

Recent case studies of centres externally rated as consistently providing high quality ECEC (Fenech, Harrison, Press, & Sumsion, 2010) and the renowned EPPE (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) and ELEYS (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) studies testify to a core of qualified early childhood teachers and strong pedagogical and service leadership providing platform from which quality ECEC can be provided. Targeting the top end of the workforce requiring a core of early childhood teachers in each service, and providing professional development opportunities in leadership will more effectively lead to sustained quality improvements across the sector.

Teacher-qualified educators

Staff qualifications have a significant impact on education outcomes for children. Having teachers in early childhood education and care settings results in high quality education experiences for children, in turn preparing children to take their place as efficient and productive members of society. Research demonstrates that the quality of these educational experiences is directly related to the quality of the children's educators (see for example (Administration for Children and Families. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2002, June; Barnett, 2003, March; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002; Burchinal et al., 2000; Howes, 1997; Whitebook, 2003). The provision of teachers educated in best practice for teaching children from birth to formal school age in early childhood settings is essential.

Teachers in early childhood settings make possible better literacy, numeracy and information technology outcomes for children. Such outcomes better position children to take their place as productive and innovative members of society.

Good teaching requires good knowledge of learners and what is learnt. Teachers' greater understanding of children and their learning is instrumental in the provision of high quality curriculum. Central to the realisation of this curriculum is teachers' ability to assess children's learning and communicate this to families. In turn, this knowledge facilitates ongoing refinement of education experiences and ultimately, productive, knowledgeable and innovative members of society.

Ongoing professional learning of educators is essential for ongoing quality of children's educational experiences. Teachers in early childhood settings are able to take carriage of such endeavours.



3. Access to high quality ECE must be equitable

Data on the participation rates of children in ECE settings clearly show that children in disadvantaged groups are underrepresented (Brennan & Fenech, 2014; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014).

High quality ECE must be accessible and affordable for all families, irrespective of a child's age (not just for 4 year olds; learning starts from birth), cultural background, learning needs, and family income and location.

Contrary to its intended function the NQF is not a uniform national system of regulation and quality assurance. Notably, disparities in staff:child ratios and teacher qualifications means that children in different states and territories, and those attending centres licensed for different numbers of children, will have varying access to settings with robust ratio and teacher quality standards (Fenech, Giugni, & Bown, 2012).

4. ECE policy must build a national system of high quality ECE, not just aim to lift the standard of quality of individual centres

The NQF, and indeed COAG's quality reform agenda, is characterised by its emphasis on lifting the quality of *individual* services rather than the quality of the *system* as a whole (Myers, 2006). This 'quality-through-regulation' approach means, in practice, that the onus is on services to find ways to meet the new standards and improve the quality of the education and care they provide. Currently, the capacity of services to do this depends upon their resources, including the fees they are able to charge and the proportion of profits that are reinvested into the setting. An approach that focused on the quality of the ECE sector as a whole system would ensure that adequate funds were directly provided to centres to support quality standards and pay appropriate wages to ECE teachers and educators.

Building a national system of high quality ECE also involves:

(i) Addressing the longstanding education:care divide that diminishes the education value of long day care centres that do not offer structured learning programs traditionally offered by preschools.

The presumption held in the PC Issues Paper that long day care is about 'care' while preschool is about 'education' is an outdated approach and not in keeping with a substantial body of research that highlights the utility of play based learning for children's learning and development (Bodrova, 2008; Dickinson, 2001; Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2004; Lloyd & Howe, 2003; Lyyntinen, Laasko, Poikkeus & Rita, 1999; Russ, Robins, & Chrisiano, 1999). Play based learning is the foundation of the national Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) to which both LDC centres and preschools must



implement. Policy initiatives to address this issue include federal government responsibility and data collection for preschools, as well as the use of language that acknowledges the less structured though nonetheless educative role long day care centres provide. Research that studied the feasibility of integrating preschools with long day centres also as to offer a more streamlined system of early childhood education warrants investigation.

(ii) Supplementing accountability with greater policy transparency

As per the NQF, the publication of centres' quality ratings and parents' accessing of this information to inform their decision-making is warranted. This public accountability, however, needs to be supplemented by greater transparency of the effectiveness of Australia's marketised approach to ECE. For example, of the multiple and varied management structures under which ECE settings operate, what relationships are evident from NQS ratings data between management structure and quality rating, and between service type and quality rating? Academics have questioned the ethics and capacity of a marketised system of ECE to support and drive high quality provision (Goodfellow, 2005; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Sumsion, 2006), yet in Australia there is a paucity of research that has investigated this issue.

A recent Australian study of the factors contributing to six long day care centres receiving sustained high quality ratings on three measures found that, on average, almost 85 per cent of their budgets was allocated to staffing, including the employment of a core group of teachers (Fenech, Harrison, Press, & Sumsion, 2010). All six centres were non-profit. A preliminary analysis of centres in NSW that had achieved an NQS Exceeding rating by Community Child care Co-operative showed that over two-thirds (67%) of these centres were community not-for-profit centres (Community Child Care Co-operative, 2013). Given that at least two-thirds of long day care centres in Australia are private, for-profit (Productivity Commission, 2011) the correlation between profit status and quality requires further investigation. To this end it is incumbent on the Australian Government to conduct and publish research using NQS data that more comprehensively investigates what may well be a significant structural barrier to the provision of a system of high quality ECE in Australia. Findings may have significant implications for governments in Australia to move to a universal system of publically funded early childhood education.

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