



Response to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper: Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

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This response to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper is from Professor Andrea Nolan, Professor of Education (Early Childhood) at Deakin University, in collaboration with her early childhood colleagues (especially Dr Anne-Marie Morrissey and Dr Janet Moles), who undertake research and teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Deakin University is Australia's 9th largest university with a strong focus on strengthening the communities it serves. It is a sector leader for student satisfaction, has a long standing record for using cutting-edge information technology in the courses it offers, and advances in research have been a hall mark of Deakin's success as a provider of post-secondary school education and training.

1. Government involvement in childcare and early learning

What role, if any, should the different levels of government play in childcare and early childhood education?

Building a strong platform for healthy development and effective learning in the early years is linked with the provision of nurturing and responsive quality experiences and programmes. Governments across Australia, as well as the Federal Government have taken the significant role of policy makers, providers and regulators, and this commitment to ECEC is vitally important to ensure consistency of standards, broad coverage and access to services, and the meeting of social and economic benefits for communities across the country. However, what is in the best interests of children, and their families, needs to drive the government agenda and engagement in ECEC.

It is now an accepted fact that the early years of childhood are a critical period in every child's life, where there is comparatively rapid growth and development. Attention both nationally and internationally is now being focused on the early childhood years as being a critical phase in the life cycle, setting the trajectory for outcomes later in life. It is now increasingly clear that the relationships, experiences and environments a child is exposed to in the early years of life are crucial to their long term health, development, learning and well-being, and set the foundations for future development. Several major reports over recent years, in Britain, the United States, New Zealand and Canada, have emphasised the importance of early childhood and the rewards gained from investment in these years. Research, notably longitudinal studies tracing the effects of early disadvantage, also identifies early childhood as a key time of the human life-cycle. Investment in ECEC must remain a priority in Australia.

What outcomes from ECEC are desirable and should be made achievable over the next decade?

What is needed (and has started to be built in some states), are collaborative practices between ECEC and schools to ensure children have a smooth and effective transition to school. At present what happens between individual ECEC services and their local schools is adhoc; there are no formal channels to pass valuable information about a child's learning and development between

ECEC and school. ECEC educators and school teachers would welcome a consistent and transparent process as a way to assist children to have a positive start to school (Nolan, Kilderry & Chu, 2014). Transition to School Statements, apparent in some Australian states, could become a national initiative, but families do require much support to contribute to these Transition Statements. This would require agreements between government services and departments, and also with community and private sectors.

The government needs to ensure that there are training courses in place which equip early childhood educators with the skills and knowledge they need to be effective in the work they undertake with young children, families and professional colleagues. The growth of Registered Training Organisations across the sector needs monitoring to ensure that quality courses are being offered as currently this cannot be guaranteed.

In some instances universities are partnering with TAFE institutions to offer a ‘seamless’ suite of qualifications where training can start with a Certificate III and build to a Masters degree or PhD. Partnerships such as this assist with the National Quality Framework regarding up-skilling and skilling-up of the ECEC workforce. Deakin University has taken this one step further by delivering the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) through the *Deakin @ Your Doorstep* platform. This gives students in regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne greater access to higher education by providing the opportunity to study close to home, and in the case of the BECE, presents a seamless career pathway to upgrade qualifications in early childhood education. This programme has been reported on by two current students in Mildura, who travel together to Sunraysia TAFE in Swan Hill regularly to continue their studies towards degree status (Allan-Grange, 2013). This is a significant contribution as research points to the lack of professional development opportunities on offer in regional, rural and remote locations (Nolan & Morrissey, 2012; Green & Nolan, 2011).

There is a need for investment in the early years to continue to rise to ensure the reform agenda established by COAG (2007) and being implemented by ACECQA continues so all children can access quality programmes across all Children’s Services no matter where, and in what circumstances they live.

Interest in International models

Sure Start focuses on improving outcomes for all children and their families, such as preparedness for school, with a particular focus on those in greatest need. There are many lessons that Australia could learn from the UK Sure Start agenda. The most comprehensive evaluation of Sure Start is Belsky & Melhuish (2007). However, the current version of Sure Start operates with inadequate funding.

2. Demand for and expectations of childcare and early learning services

The effect of the different types of ECEC on children’s learning and development and preparedness for school

There needs to be a more collaborative, formal process in place between ECEC services and schools regarding young children transitioning to school. Research undertaken by Nolan, Hamm, McCartin & Hunt (2009) ‘*Outcomes and indicators of a positive start to school*’, emphasises the importance and significance of promoting continuity of learning through the transition to school process which needs to involve collaborative, respectful and responsive relationships with all those involved with the care and education of children. Information about children needs to be shared between services to ensure continuity and congruence in learning pedagogies and environments.

3. Availability and cost of childcare and early learning services

Approaches to improving flexibility, including innovative options that could involve new provider models

How well are the needs of disadvantaged, vulnerable or other additional needs children being met by the ECEC sector as a whole, or by individual types of care, and in particular regions

There is a need to be sensitive to the requirements and ‘ways of operating’ of families with complex needs at a local level (Nolan, 2012). The following provides a case study to illustrate how flexible hours and adding capacity to a preschool programme by offering other services, taking a multidisciplinary approach, has added value and made attending the preschool service more attractive for parents.

The closure of a local preschool in a disadvantaged regional area of Victoria due to declining numbers and management issues enabled a rethinking of the service offered as there was widespread recognition that comprehensive changes were required to the existing preschool model if a new early childhood learning programme was to succeed. The local Best Start Project had been operating in the community for a number of years with a strong and committed partnership network amongst a wide range of local agencies and community organisations. Discussions commenced within the existing Best Start Project Partnership about creating an integrated child and family centre that was unique to the area. Parents attending the existing preschool (before its closure) when surveyed indicated they wanted longer sessions, and were also interested in other services being available at the centre. The successful establishment, through the Best Start Project, of a facilitated playgroup and an occasional care programme provided an encouraging platform for the potential development of a more sustainable preschool model. An Early Learning and Family Centre was successfully established and there is no doubt that adding capacity to the preschool programme by offering other services, taking a multidisciplinary approach, added value for parents and children attending the preschool. Enrolment numbers steadily grew and parents began utilising the supporting services located on site. For example the number of parents utilising the Centacare service since it was introduced saw the service expand from 2 days a week to 5 days a week within 18 months.

With many of the families described as ‘*authority shy*’ engaging them in a programme that made them feel comfortable and welcome helped break down barriers that are associated with families with complex needs. In discussions with the parents at the centre, what they considered as the most important aspect about the programme was the inclusive communication that occurred between children, teachers and parents. Parents commented that they valued being accepted and not being discriminated against. In relation to their children, the parents valued the opportunity for their children to be happy, learn to socialise with other children and make friends, play co-operatively, share, improve their communication skills including listening and speaking, build their self-esteem, learn skills such as cutting and using writing implements, learn songs and rhymes, develop the ability to listen to and tell stories, and gain a sense of who they are as a person.

What can be confirmed is the high uptake of the preschool programme with less absenteeism which equates to high average attendance numbers. The teachers measure success in the increased enrolment, good attendance rates and measures of individual children’s success.

Overall, parents saw no barriers to their participation. They liked the fact that the preschool was in the local area enabling many families to walk to the centre, and having other services located nearby added value for them. Not having to pay for the service was viewed as an important factor in the child being able to attend.

As is highlighted in the State-wide Evaluation of Best Start (2006), engaging vulnerable families was facilitated by practices which were flexible, added value, involved service co-operation and additional resources, and focused on making personal connections with families. ‘Best Start’ is a Victorian Government initiative with the aim to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of all young children’s development, learning and well-being from pregnancy through transition to school. Best Start also has a particular focus on ensuring that vulnerable children and their families who are not currently engaged with universal services, or prematurely disengaged, are able to participate in and benefit from the universal service platform. Best Start provides funding to engage and support families, local services and local government in a collaborative local planning partnership. ‘The Best Start sites enthusiastically embraced the opportunities provided by the partnership arrangements to work together locally across the early childhood

sector. It contrasted with the earlier experiences of most organisations and agencies in most sites of working in isolation or sometimes competing against each other... Working together as a partnership made possible strategic planning that took expression in Action plans, leading on to the identification, development and implementation of new projects to meet service gaps...' (Raban et al., Executive Summary, 2006).

There are difficulties in regional, rural and remote communities in accessing appropriate ECEC services with staffing an ongoing issue both in recruitment and retention. Green and Nolan (2011) contend that this is due in part to a lack of understanding of living and working in these communities and what that entails and demands.

Professional development to support ECEC staff can also be difficult for staff in regional, rural and remote services. It is often restricted due to the lack of offerings within the local area, the cost of travelling to sessions and the lack of qualified substitution staff (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2010; Waniganayake & Nolan, 2005). This has been reported as an issue for these staff in attending mentoring programmes (Nolan, Morrissey & Beahan, 2013).

4. Government regulation of childcare and early learning

The impact of the NQF on the ECEC workforce: the effect of increased staff ratios and qualification requirements on outcomes for children

As noted in the discussion paper, the employment of staff in childcare and preschool programmes represents a significant proportion of running costs, and employment of teachers represent the highest level of staffing costs. The employment of teachers in childcare programmes can also be regarded as an investment, based on evidence of the contribution to quality that degree-qualified teachers can make to a childcare programme. However, research has also identified that teacher *leadership* as an important factor in programme quality, over and above their qualifications and presence in a service (Sammons et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2003). For a teacher to be able to use their enhanced knowledge and particular educational expertise to effect, positive change within in their centre requires both leadership from the teacher, and a support structure that enables this (Crowther, Kagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002; Early et al., 2005).

Staff development and education are important discriminators of high quality early childhood programmes, with research in ECEC consistently identifying staff as the cornerstone of excellence. However, with the currently expanding growth in the ECEC sector, tenure and turnover of skilled staff is an issue that threatens to prevent the full implementation of the COAG ECEC reforms, where the degree of difficulty increases with remoteness (Productivity Research Report, 2011).

It is recognised that the ECEC workforce needs to expand and skill-up and up-skill to meet the government reforms within the early childhood sector (Productivity Commission, 2011). In response to workforce shortages Deakin University has developed different delivery modes for its early childhood courses. Partnering with TAFE institutions in rural and regional centres, now enables students to work and study in their local communities. Many Bachelor of Early Childhood Education Deakin @ Your Doorstep students from rural and regional Victoria have experienced empowerment by knowing that they can contribute to their community whilst living and studying from their home town.

What is concerning are stop-gap, temporary measures which have been introduced relating to qualifications (ACECQA, Sept. 2013) to assist with the perceived workforce shortfall. The employment of people as graduates when they have not completed a degree runs counter to the Australian Qualifications Framework for recognition of the volume and level of training that is required for graduate status. These transitional measures (to be reviewed in 2016) compromise the government's commitment to and recognition of the importance of early childhood educator qualifications for improved outcomes for children. Different qualifications are based on specific

bodies of knowledge and expertise, and these cannot be considered as interchangeable or identical. For example an early childhood diploma covers different content to that covered in a teaching degree course.

Research (Urban et al., 2012 p. 509) states that it is essential in providing quality ECEC to:

- promote professionalism in early childhood across all layers of the professional, including practice, management, qualification and training, and research;
- improve pre- and in-service training of the ECEC workforce; and
- develop an understanding of qualification requirements for the ECEC workforce that shares common values and respects the diversity of approaches.

The ‘Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications’ (European Commission, 2005) proposes that (school) teaching needs to be seen as a graduate profession at Masters Level. Urban et al. (2012), therefore argue that ‘there can, in principle, be no justification for applying different (i.e. lower) standards to the early childhood profession. From a systemic perspective, it should be added that inclusive professionalization needs diversification as well as a general increase of formal qualifications. This means that the full range of qualifications, including MA and doctoral level must be available to the ECEC profession’ (p.520). This has been evidenced (Penn, 2011) as enhancing quality outcomes for young children’s ongoing learning and development.

Other workforce and workplace issues, including any aspect of government regulation that affects the attractiveness of childcare or early learning as a vocation

There is evidence that many early childhood teachers working in Victorian childcare centres, are given neither the support, opportunity or authority to exercise educational leadership outside of their own programmes for the 4-5yr old preschoolers in their group (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013; Ireland, 2010). This is despite the fact that early childhood teachers in Victoria at least, are required to undertake professional experience placements with birth-to-three year olds, and study development, pedagogy and theory relevant to that age group, in their teacher education courses. There appears to be a prevailing view that teachers in childcare programmes do not have anything to contribute to programmes for children under three (Ireland, 2006; Rouse, Morrissey & Rahimi, 2012). This is concerning when we know that children’s experiences in the first three years of life are a critical influence on later learning and development, and that higher level staff qualifications are linked to better quality programmes for this age group (Ireland, 2006; Norris, 2010; Whitebook, 2003).

Research into mentoring early childhood early career teachers in Victoria (Nolan, Morrissey & Beahan, 2013) has found that feelings of isolation experienced by new graduates, or teachers working in professionally isolated areas, can become crippling to innovation, as many mentees do not have confidence in their practice and question if what they were doing is ‘right’. This lack of confidence also influences the amount of stress teachers feel and this has a direct impact on their interactions with the children they teach and their families. They have self-doubts about their ability as a new graduate teacher and have no one to share these feelings with. Many think they are the only ones feeling this way. Participating in a mentoring programme demonstrated a positive influence on outcomes for children due to the improved and extended knowledge of the educators. There were obvious improvements to practice and this increased the confidence level of the mentees in relation to their professional practice. There was a strong sentiment that being more confident educators leads to them being more relaxed, responsive, and focused in their professional practice. This can create a ripple effect and spill into all aspects of work such as ways of working with children and families which leads to positive relationships.

Mentoring is important for both beginning and experienced teachers experiencing isolation, and everyone gains from participating in mentoring if they are open to the process. Mentors have an

opportunity to pass on their knowledge and experience, gain lots of new ideas, are prompted to reflect on their own practice, gain mentoring skills which they can transfer to their own settings, and expand their networks; Mentees feel part of a professional network, they feel valued for what they know and bring to their teaching, they gain confidence in themselves as educators, they have a 'critical friend' to share successes and disappointments with without the fear of being judged, and they have the opportunity to reflect on one aspect of their practice with guidance and support from a mentor and other colleagues (Nolan, Morrissey & Beahan, 2013). In regional, rural and remote areas, early childhood services and staff can be geographically isolated and sparsely distributed. This can make it difficult to establish professional networks and provide local professional development and mentoring (Green & Nolan, 2011).

Early childhood teacher retention and professional satisfaction is closely related to the level of support and mentorship they receive; yet, research investigating the field of ECEC internationally has found that opportunities to participate in in-service training and professional learning are unequal, and staff with the lowest levels of initial training tend to have the least access (OECD, 2001).

Much has been written about the issues related to regional, rural and remote education. Most prevalent are publications about teacher shortage in 'the bush', attraction and retention of teachers, and ways of maintaining professional learning in relatively isolated communities. New frameworks that move away from a deficit model and negative perceptions of rural communities, such as 'place pedagogy' (Somerville, 2007) 'rural social space' (Lock et al, 2008), and 'space and place' theory (Green, Noone & Nolan, 2013) are now emerging. Adequately preparing the workforce to be confident and comfortable teaching in regional, rural and remote early childhood settings will need to be one goal within the wider agenda.

To make ECEC an attractive career path salaries will need to be increased in order to attract and retain trained staff, this fits with the professionalization of the ECEC workforce.

Are the requirements associated with more subjective aspects of the National Quality Standards, such as 'relationships with children', clear to service operators and regulatory staff? Is further guidance required?

Are there lower cost ways to achieve the regulatory objectives for ECEC?

While the NQF has mandated that every centre should have a staff member in the role of 'educational leader', there is still considerable confusion around the nature of the role, as well as no indication of what support should be provided for those taking up this responsibility. Along with the lack of opportunity for teacher leadership in their centres, the current situation represents an apparent waste of the investment in the degree preparation and employment of teachers in childcare centres. Feedback from students on placement, and academic staff visiting students at centres, suggest that authority, and hence 'leadership', is often in the hands of coordinators or managers who can have limited and superficial understanding of the learning and development needs of young children. Coupled with the pressure of increasing regulation and a challenging business environment, this can often lead to low quality learning environments and programmes (particularly for children under three years), and inappropriate interpretations of regulatory requirements, including over-emphasis on 'efficiency' and routines. This can lead to stress for staff, and a restrictive professional environment resulting in burnout and high turnover. Examples of practices reported by student teachers and academic supervisors in childcare centres include:

- Inappropriate and poor quality physical environments and resources, such as: limited outdoor areas, furnished with artificial materials and fixed equipment, devoid of natural elements and offering children limited opportunities for challenging play and physical activity; a lack of open-ended and challenging resources, with a preponderance of

plastic single-use 'toys', displays of cartoon characters and 'production-line' artwork, and use of templates;

- Babies and toddlers kept indoors for days at a time;
- Strict routines and hygiene protocols that do not account for the developmental needs of very young children. For example: toddlers being forced to lie on their beds for hours at rest time, when they are not ready to sleep; banning of messy play and activities such as art, water play, and engagement with dirt and plants outside;
- Lack of stimulating play and language interactions with babies and toddlers, with staff focused on cleaning and managing routines rather than talking and interacting with children at this crucial stage for social and language development.

It should be noted that these things are not observed in all childcare programmes, but they are observed in too many. Early childhood educators who have undertaken their diploma or teaching qualification at a TAFE, quality RTO or university, would have been taught that these practices are counter to what research and knowledge of child development tell us is quality practice. The fact that low quality practices are still all too frequent in childcare centres suggests a challenging professional environment as one cause of the difficulties in attracting early childhood professionals to work in childcare (along with the lower award conditions). It also indicates that the skills, knowledge and expertise of these professionals is being squandered, a waste of the investment that their employment represents.

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