



## **Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry on future option for child care and early childhood education**

### **Introduction**

This submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry on future options for childcare and early childhood learning has been prepared by the Western Australian Community Services, Health and Education Training Council in consultation with key stakeholders and children's services industry experts in Western Australia.

The submission focuses on the following main areas of the inquiry that relate most directly to the Training Council's remit, which is to provide training and workforce planning and development advice to the WA government on behalf of the industries covered. The inquiry areas are:

1. The contribution of child care to workforce participation and child development
2. Alternative models of care, including those overseas, which could be considered for trial in Australia
3. The impact of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade

### **1. The contribution of child care to workforce participation**

The provision of sufficient quality child care services is a major influence on levels of workforce participation by mothers in the WA community. There has been plenty of evidence over recent years, especially during the last WA period of economic growth that lack of quality child care services had a marked negative impact on the labour and skill levels available to industry. Quality child care services allow parents to focus on work and hence contribute positively to workforce participation and development. The feedback from industry is that it is difficult for families to choose between quality and convenience. Division between quality and choice will widen if there are no strong quality indicators.

Accessible quality child care enables parents to balance the care of their children with their decision to participate in the workforce.

### **2. The contribution of child care to child development**

All ECEC services should be of high quality to support good developmental outcomes for the children using the services.



The role played by training and education in preparing child care workers to provide quality services is vital. Ensuring that staff are trained and qualified is difficult, especially in the large WA regional and remote areas where it is difficult to deliver training and professional support. Children in regional and remote areas and other 'hard-to-staff' areas are educationally vulnerable and need the best start to their education.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) changes recognise the importance of quality services and aim to ensure that all Australian children get the best start in life.

In 2012 as part of the training package continuous improvement process the Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council's (CS&H ISC) 'streamlined' the Early Childhood Education and Care qualifications to the new standards required by the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC). The CS&H ISC viewed the streamlining as an opportunity to improve content and ensure that the children's services qualifications in the community services training package better met to industry projected needs. The streamlining review focused on ensuring that the children's services qualifications included quality assessment requirements. Concerns have been expressed by industry about the quality of VET delivery by RTOs. Issues identified include:

- Concerns about auditing quality of RTOs delivering to the sector where the focus appears to be on AQTF compliance rather than quality training outcomes
- Concerns that some auditors do not have the children's services experience both in respect to working in the sector and delivering child care qualifications
- Concerns that some RTO lecturers also lack experience of working in the sector;
- Concerns about difficulties faced by RTO lecturers trying to maintain their required level of industry currency. There are barriers within child care services as well as cost issues for the RTOs
- Concerns about on line delivery and whether children's services students can acquire the high level of interpersonal skills without actual face to face contact with trainers and without supervised fieldwork placements in child care settings
- Concerns that some competency based assessment are overlooking vital skills such as spelling, grammar, referencing and professional presentation that are essential to a good educator
- Concerns about the wide variation in training delivery timelines between one RTO and another and thus the speed with which some students have become qualified

### **Traineeships**

Despite advantages provided by the traineeships there is a large attrition rate. Other concerns are that there is no scrutiny of the wide difference in time for some trainees to complete compared with others.



### **3. Alternative models of care, including those overseas, which could be considered for trial in Australia**

WA children's services sector personnel have had experience overseas and were particularly impressed with the alternative models of care in Sweden and in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy.

### **4. The impact of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade**

The biggest advantage of NQF is that it brings care and education together.

#### **Educational Program and Practice Standards**

The NQS lays emphasis on the education program and practice standards. The education program should apply to all from 0-5 years. Focus in school programs continues to be on literacy and numeracy. There is much more than this to children's development. There is a need to ensure that programs emphasise play and sense of agency. The increasing trend towards putting 3-4 year old children in school settings on the basis that school settings can contribute to the development of children in a better way is false unless the school is embracing all aspects of Early Years Learning Framework. This holds value if the schools are scrutinised in the same way as child care centres and are able to provide evidence that they are supporting children's sense of agency.

#### **Children's Health and safety standards:**

Understanding of children's Health and safety in a child care service setting is different to children's Health and safety in a school. The position of responsibility has shifted in schools. There needs to be compatibility in how the two settings understand children's Health and safety.

#### **Staffing arrangements:**

The WA introduction of the national law for the 'Early Years Learning Framework' (EYLF) has major compliance and workforce implications for the Education and Care sector (formerly the Children's Services sector) in WA. One major implication is there is an urgent need to increase the numbers of Child Care educators with higher VET and Higher Education qualifications.

The requirement of having early childhood teacher in attendance sometimes or at all times when the service is being provided will be challenging. The teacher who has not worked earlier in child care will not have any exposure to child care settings other than four weeks



training which is not sufficient as per industry experts. They need training or actual skill sets keeping in view the National Quality Standards. Currently the qualification brings the teacher in but not the skills. There is a need for increase in gap training.

**Continuity of care:**

Continuity of care is seen as an important aspect of quality child care for children in the early years of life. NQF focuses on providing continuity of care for all children. It becomes difficult for the industry to achieve this due to extremely high turnover. A very high percentage of child care workers leave or change jobs which disrupts continuity of care for children. We need to find answers on how to support continuity of care and how to increase retention of the children's services workforce?

It is difficult to provide flexibility of work hours to the child care staff as it limits continuity of care.

High level of part time employment in child care centres is an issue that creates complexities with the rosters and different shifts. It is difficult for part-time carers to understand the needs of children and develop positive relationships with children and communicate effectively about child's needs with parents.

**Leadership and service management:**

Effective leadership contributes to sustained quality relationships and environments that facilitate children's learning and development. People working as educators are not necessarily the right people to lead the team or the centre. The CHC08 children's services qualifications did not have appropriate leadership units. However, the new Early Childhood Education and Care qualifications have got the right leadership units which should bring leadership skills to staff if delivered appropriately.