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The Commissioner
Productivity Commission
Department of Education, Australian Government

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Dear Commissioner

I write on behalf of the School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology, to thank you for the opportunity to make a written submission to the *Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*. Our submission follows a series of professional conversations led by the School. Contributors to this submission include:

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Best wishes in your deliberations.

Professor Ann Farrell
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***Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and
Early Childhood Learning***

from

**School of Early Childhood
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology**

**The School of Early Childhood: Engagement in Early Childhood Education
and Care (ECEC)**

The School of Early Childhood at Queensland University of Technology is a leader of teacher education programs in Australia. We believe that educator quality is the single most important factor in ensuring quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and positive outcomes for children, families and the community, and strive for excellence in the preparation of early childhood professionals. With a specialist focus on children birth to eight years, our courses prepare early childhood teachers to work across the full range of ECEC settings: prior to school and in the early years of school. Enabling a range of vocational outcomes in ECEC, our new Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) is accredited by both the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). Preparing early childhood teachers to work in the 'real world', we combine outstanding academic programs taught by experts in ECEC with leading-edge research and integrated field experience. We maintain strong collaborative partnerships with the ECEC sector to ensure that our courses are relevant and our graduating teachers are work-ready. We provide a career pathway to qualifications by recognising the value of previous Vocational Education and Training (VET) for educators holding a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care, and by providing graduate entry programs for students who already hold relevant degrees. We engage with the community, domestically and internationally to support access to quality ECEC, and serve as authorities in ECEC. Many staff are members of key advisory committees and professional organisations such as Early Childhood Australia, the Early Childhood Teachers' Association of Queensland and the Queensland Children's Services Alliance, with the Head of School an invited Expert Panellist with the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. Similarly, we are a preferred provider of professional learning activities, research and consultancy for several government and non-government agencies nation-wide.

We commend Australian, State and Territory governments' continuing commitment to strengthening access to inclusive, quality ECEC services, and welcome the opportunity to share views on a range of related issues. Reflecting the context of our work and the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry, the focus of our submission is on strengthening access to *formal* ECEC services prior to school entry (e.g., centre-based long day care, preschool/kindergarten, family day care and outside school hours care).

This submission is based on a series of professional conversations conducted with staff in the QUT School of Early Childhood, and draws on the diverse professional knowledge, practical teaching experience, professional connections and research backgrounds of staff within our school. The submission comprises two parts: In Part 1,

we identify key ideas and values that underpin our thinking about ECEC; and In Part 2, we respond to the topics and questions provided in the *Issues Paper* (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2013) and for which we have knowledge and are able to value add.

Part 1: Overarching issues for consideration

There is strong evidence that investment in quality ECEC yields significant and lasting educational, social and economic benefits for children, their families and broader society (Cunha, Heckman, Lockner & Masterov, 2005; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart., 1993). Recognising multiple and shared benefits, QUT's School of Early Childhood commends the ongoing national policy focus on supporting access to quality ECEC for all Australian children and families. While we view this as a shared responsibility, requiring ongoing collaboration between different levels of government, the sector, the community, business and industry, we strongly believe that government maintains a leadership role in this area.

In thinking about the issues raised, and to provide a context for our responses, we draw upon the title of our national early years curriculum: *Belonging, Being and Becoming* (DEEWR, 2009). Its title reflects the way in which we see children and provides an excellent framework for considering the purpose and nature of an effective ECEC service system. For example, empirical research on quality ECEC and early learning, suggests that effective ECEC services respect and respond to family diversity, work in partnership with families and communities, and build a sense of belonging and connectedness for children, families and educators. We believe that children and families have the right to access quality ECEC, that children should enjoy and benefit from being in ECEC and parents should feel confident that their children are receiving quality care and education. Last, but not least, we recognise the significant and lasting impact of quality ECEC on children's health, wellbeing, life chances and lifelong learning, and the capacity for ECEC services to improve outcomes for children and families from low socio-economic communities.

As noted, our primary focus here is on formal ECEC services, and, as such, reflects research findings showing that investment in services offers the greatest cost-benefit return for society in economic, social and educational terms (Heckman, 2011; World Bank, 2011). We distinguish formal services on the basis that they employ qualified educators who teach to a curriculum and exercise professional judgment in their daily work with children, families and communities. We consider the provision of quality ECEC to be a public good, in the same context as the provision of school education, and worthy of public investment. In this submission, we use the term 'early childhood education and care (ECEC)' to denote the collection of services that comprise our current formal service system, and to acknowledge the integrated nature of quality education and care services. We commend recent moves towards a more integrated education and care service system (e.g., the establishment of single government agencies with responsibility for ECEC and school education; an integrated approach to quality assurance; a national learning framework that covers all ECEC services prior to school), and reject the application of artificial and unhelpful distinctions between 'child care' and 'early education or learning'. We note that, internationally, these are recognised as inseparable dimensions of quality ECEC, prior to and in school (Moss, 2007; OECD, 2006).

Following on from this, the School of Early Childhood views ECEC as a profession that adheres to professional standards and practices and strongly encourages government to reconsider the basic application of market terminology and concepts (e.g. market, industry, worker) to this field, as such terminology fails to recognise the professional work and value of educators in these services. Evidence suggests that government leadership in this regard is likely to have a positive net effect, increasing parent confidence in their ECEC services while enhancing the professional identity, status and job satisfaction of those working in ECEC.

The research is unequivocal with regard to the need to support quality service provision. Investment in quality and inclusive ECEC services with qualified teachers and educators are seen to provide individual benefits for children and their families, and collective benefits for society (Cunha, Heckman, Lockner & Masterov, 2005; OECD, 2006; 2012), with particular benefits for those from low socio-economic communities (Heckman, 2011). Social economists such as Heckman in the United States and Cleveland in Canada attest to the significant benefits of investment in quality ECEC and, conversely, to the cost savings in doing so in terms of future national expenditure on health and wellbeing, education, employment and economic productivity. International reviews of policy and research (e.g., OECD, 2006; 2012) are explicit in identifying significant longer-term national social and economic benefits, including increased parental workforce participation, improved educational outcomes and development of the future workforce, greater social inclusion, higher rates of fertility and savings from reduced expenditure on high-cost remedial services and interventions. Conversely, there is broad agreement that poor quality ECEC fails to achieve the desired outcomes and, at worst, may compromise or damage children's health, development, learning and wellbeing necessitating later and more costly intervention and support. According to economists, there is need to take into account the short and long-term costs and benefits of investment in quality ECEC, including the cost of lost opportunities, particularly for employment, and potential cost of later interventions.

Part 2: Responses to selected questions

1. Government involvement in ECEC

- ***Desired outcomes and objectives of ECEC***

The School of Early Childhood endorses the Australian Government's objectives to strengthen access to affordable, responsive and quality ECEC: (i) to support workforce participation; and (ii) to optimise children's learning, development, health and wellbeing. There is considerable evidence, including large-scale randomised trials which indicate that access to quality ECEC has beneficial effects in important areas of children's development and wellbeing, including cognitive development and preventing school failure (Zortich, Roberts & Oakley, 2009). In addition, we perceive that a quality ECEC system has an equally important role to play in terms of promoting social justice, social inclusion and active citizenship. We believe that these objectives are inter-related, of equal importance to the future of this nation, and that none ought to be privileged above another. For example, research substantiates that the realisation of positive outcomes is dependent upon the provision of quality ECEC

services (Cunha, Heckman, Lockner & Masterov, 2005), characterised by qualified educators, informed educational programs, collaborative partnerships with families and communities and effective leadership (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett, 2010). Similarly, any assessment of costs and benefits needs to take into account immediate and longer-term outcomes. For example, quality ECEC supports parent workforce participation and economic productivity in the immediate sense, but also provides the educational foundation for the participation, productivity and prosperity of the next generation. Recognising these inter-relationships, we argue the importance of a balanced approach to ECEC policy, with a focus on supporting access, affordability and flexibility while assuring quality service provision.

- ***Role of government in ECEC***

There is no doubt that quality counts. The evidence is clear. As noted, investment in the provision of high quality ECEC yields a high return for children, families and the broader community, while poorer quality services do not realise the same benefits and may cause damage that requires later remediation (Cleveland, 2007; Heckman 2011; World Bank 2011). We believe that government has a responsibility to put into place funding programs and regulatory frameworks to promote and support equitable access to high quality ECEC.

Regulation and quality assurance. Recent national policy initiatives, such as the introduction of the National Quality Framework (and related Learning Frameworks) and commitment to universal preschool provision have supported progress towards a strong integrated ECEC system. International policy reviews (OECD, 2006; World Bank, 2008; 2011) highlight the importance of a national vision, objectives and lead strategies in the quest to improve access to quality ECEC. We perceive that Australia's *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (COAG, 2009) provides a sound and informed policy framework upon which to build.

Funding and supporting a strong universal ECEC service system. In line with current policy and research, the School of Early Childhood advocates public investment to build a strong platform of universal ECEC services that deliver inclusive quality programs that promote children's learning, support parents in their parenting role and enable workforce participation. We believe that funding needs to cover the real cost of providing access to quality services, and, that it is essential to review current funding models for ECEC that rely solely on the provision of fee subsidies for families. There is evidence, and precedence (e.g. preschool/kindergarten funding models), to suggest that a combination of supply and demand funding approaches can strengthen the provision of quality and affordable ECEC. Building on this base, additional targeted support and services can be offered in a positive, non-stigmatising and cost effective manner.

Planning to support equitable access and more integrated service provision. Recognising the challenge of providing access to quality ECEC across Australia, we highlight that there remain some gaps in provision, particularly in rural and remote communities. Government has a role to play in planning the service system, and addressing market failure in some areas. We believe that government involvement in planning the service system is appropriate in a context in which public funds are invested, and necessary to achieve equitable access to quality ECEC that is affordable and viable. We also perceive that strengthening this role could support the

provision of more integrated ECEC services and enhanced access to a broader range of child and family support services within local communities.

See Section 4 for further perspectives on the *National Quality Framework*.

- ***Exemplary international models of ECEC***

As researchers, we believe that Australia can learn a great deal by studying international ECEC models and service systems. The *Issues Paper* (2013) draws attention to some different models, including some that have already influenced the design of services in Australia. For example, the design of the highly successful Queensland Early Years Centres was informed by the Sure Start Children's Centres and similar integrated models in the United States of America and Canada, and this, in turn, has generated a hybrid Australian model of innovative and integrated ECEC service provision. Retaining our focus on formal ECEC, on the one hand, we draw attention to celebrated ECEC models and service systems in Sweden, Finland and Italy (i.e., Reggio Emilia Children's Centres). On the other hand, there is a need for caution when considering international models and approaches for adoption in Australia as it is not possible to ensure their efficacy within Australian ECEC contexts. Evaluations must take into account the mix of historical, social and cultural factors that have shaped how these services are delivered, funded, regulated and supported. This includes consideration of related child and family policies, as well as community views regarding children, families and ECEC, and how these impact on the provision and utilisation of services.

2. Demand for and expectations of ECEC

- There is increasing evidence that parents recognise the influence of the early years on learning and successful transition to school; and expect formal ECEC service to offer both care and education. In a recent study of 200 Brisbane parents using a range of formal ECEC services, the top two reasons for the use of ECEC were: (1) to support workforce participation and (2) to promote early learning (Irvine, 2013). Many parents indicated that they wanted more information about their children's learning, as well as ideas about how they could support learning at home.
- The School of Early Childhood also argues the need for government to maintain a balanced focus on individual and collective needs and expectations, and to demonstrate leadership in enhancing community awareness of the contribution of ECEC to national objectives and raising community expectations for the provision of quality ECEC.

3. Availability and cost of ECEC

- While recognising room for innovation and improvement, we strongly challenge what appears to be a deficit view of the current ECEC service system, in particular, the perception that current service models are unable to meet diverse and changing family needs. A case in point is that of family day care, which offers a proven model of flexible, affordable and quality ECEC that is available during standard and non-standard working hours (i.e., overnight and on weekends). Family day care educators are qualified (with many holding diplomas and degrees), supported and monitored by a qualified coordination unit and required to comply with the National

Quality Framework. These characteristics distinguish this form of home-based ECEC from other informal care arrangements.

- Similarly, there are other innovative local service models and approaches seeking to respond to diverse and changing child and family needs. These include: extended hours preschool/kindergarten programs (e.g., *Kindy Plus*); approved kindergarten programs integrated within long day care services (Gowrie Queensland); and integrated Early Years Centres that draw together interdisciplinary child health, education and family support services. We contend that these models and approaches are worthy of further research and consideration for wider adoption alongside international models where evidence indicates they are achieving the desired outcomes (e.g., enhanced parenting, improved educational outcomes, greater social inclusion, increased parental workforce participation).

Supporting inclusive service provision

- We believe that all children and families have the right to access quality ECEC services, and that quality services are inclusive and work with families to cater for children with diverse backgrounds, abilities and needs. Drawing on the literature on promotion, prevention and early intervention in the early years (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), we recognise the potential for these services to promote positive outcomes for all children and families, and to improve outcomes and life chances for children and families from disadvantaged and low socio-economic communities.
- As noted earlier, we contend that Australia needs to build a strong platform of universal ECEC services, with additional funding for these services to provide enhanced services and support for children and families with additional needs. This approach must be non-stigmatising, support social inclusion, optimise children's learning and development. It must also be cost effective.
- The educational and social benefits of early intervention for children with additional needs is well documented, however the real and hidden costs of caring are less acknowledged. For families with additional needs, access to quality ECEC is important for a variety of reasons, including: supporting children to reach their potential; supporting parent wellbeing through the provision of respite care; enabling parents to work and to meet increased medical and home care expenses; and providing opportunities to meet the needs of other family members
- We recognise that many families and children with additional needs have difficulty accessing ECEC. Research suggests that this is due to a combination of factors, including educator's knowledge, attitudes and capacities to support inclusive practice; organisational support for inclusion; location of services; cost to parents and services; administration of inclusion support programs, and the difficulty accessing additional inclusion support when needed (Cumming & Wong, 2012; Petriwskyj, 2010). There is a need for further work to be undertaken to understand and address these barriers.
- As teacher educators, we acknowledge that all ECEC services will have children and families with diverse needs, and that education and training courses must ensure

that graduates have the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to support inclusive practice and meaningful programs for all children.

- The work of embedding Indigenous perspectives in all aspects of ECEC requires localised properties, but there are elements of this work that are applicable to all settings. We believe that when policy makers centralise the scholarship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, researchers and communities, it becomes possible to move toward centralising Indigenous perspectives in practice, and away from peripheral forms of inclusion (Miller, 2013). In turn, this opens up new ways of thinking and working in ECEC that promote positive outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and families, and thereby, the whole community.
- We recognise that pre-service teachers require particular skill sets and dispositions to develop critical approaches in the teaching of all children about the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and related contemporary issues (Phillips, 2011).

Cost of ECEC

- While acknowledging increased investment in formal ECEC services over the past decade, and a raft of national policies devised to enhance accessibility and quality, we note that Australia's national investment in ECEC which currently sits at around 0.4% of GDP continues to be below the OECD average of 0.6% (OECD, 2011) and falls well short of the advocated minimum public expenditure of 1.0% of GDP.
- Acknowledging the complexities associated with undertaking cost benefits analysis in ECEC, we note that there are already agreed principles and practices, in the international work of social economists such as Heckman (2011) and Cleveland (2007). Drawing on this body of work, we query what seems to be a dominant and shortsighted focus on the cost of ECEC service provision only for parents and providers. To support informed policy decision-making, and allocation of funding, government must consider costs and benefits more broadly (e.g. individual and collective benefits and savings over time; cost of lost opportunity; future expenditure on intervention and remediation services). The cost of not supporting access to quality ECEC services is much greater than the upfront investment required (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993).

4. Government regulation of ECEC

- Recognising the role of quality ECEC in supporting workforce participation and promoting early learning, the School of Early Childhood believes that government has an important role to play in terms of creating the conditions necessary to support quality service provision. This includes establishing and enforcing an effective system of regulation and quality assurance. We recognises the National Quality Framework (NQF), comprising the National Quality Standard, new Assessment and Rating System, and related learning frameworks, to be a contemporary example of effective regulation (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett, 2010). In making this claim, we note the following positive features of the National Quality Framework (NQF):

- The framework is informed by contemporary research evidence and focuses on key quality determinants such as educator qualifications, staff to child ratios, educational programs, partnerships with families and communities and educational leadership.
- The framework shifts attention to child outcomes rather than inputs and outputs of ECEC.
- The framework marks a change from prescriptive regulations to performance based standards that support flexibility, professional judgment and responsive local service provision.
- The framework draws together legal minimum standards and higher quality aspirational standards and provides an integrated approach to regulation and quality assurance.
- The framework encourages and supports critical reflection, ongoing professional learning and continuous quality improvement.

While we recognise the challenge of implementing a new regulatory system, for government and services, we believe that the NQF marks an important step forward in ECEC in Australia. A recent collaborative research project with Goodstart Early Learning found that meaningful engagement with the NQF enhanced professional knowledge, supported critical reflection and practice change, and focused attention on children's learning and wellbeing (Sumsion, Harrison & Irvine, 2013). Further attesting to the efficacy of the NQF, we note that an increasing number of early childhood services that are not regulated (e.g., playgroups, integrated Early Years Centres) are voluntarily applying the NQF (and Early Years Learning Framework) in efforts to continually improve their practice and public perceptions of their service provision.

We perceive that implementation of the new standards is well underway in the majority of services, and that it would be a retrograde step to undo or slow implementation at this time of significant momentum.

- ***Workforce development***

- There is clear empirical evidence that the qualifications and quality of early childhood educators is the key determinant of the quality of ECEC services and outcomes for children, families and communities (Sammons, Elliot, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Tayler & Thorpe, 2012). To realise national objectives and "the highest net community benefits" (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2013, p. 1), Australia needs to ensure a qualified, skilled and sustainable ECEC workforce. This begins with the provision of quality pre-service courses at all levels (certificate III, diploma and degree) that link policy, theory and practice and promote effective teaching and learning in the early years. We support the staged introduction of enhanced qualification requirements for educators in different positions, including new quality requirements for early childhood teachers in long day care, as a key quality improvement strategy (Sammons, et al., 2004). We maintain the need for specialised early childhood courses, covering the age range birth to eight years and all formal ECEC settings (i.e. prior to school and the early years of school). We note that Queensland ECEC regulations have included minimum qualification requirements (for educators in centre-based and home-based ECEC) for nearly 10 years, and that current ECEC fees generally remain below the

national average. We also promote the need for enhanced qualification pathways, which value and build on prior accredited education and training.

- Recognising the complexity of educators' work, and diverse and changing needs and expectations, current quality standards (e.g., NQF. National Professional Teaching Standards) mandate the need for critical reflection and ongoing professional learning. We commend the Australian Government for its continuing financial commitment to support access to high quality professional learning through programs such as the Inclusion and Professional Support Program. We strongly support a coordinated approach to effective professional learning that enables flexibility and innovation at the local level and view this as a cost effective approach to enhancing quality in ECEC.
- We strongly believe that ECEC is a profession, and that qualified and quality educators make a lasting contribution to children, families and the nation.

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