

24 January 2014

Dr Wendy Craik AM
Presiding Commissioner
Childcare Inquiry
Productivity Commission
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CANBERRA CITY ACT 2600
sent via email: childcare@pc.gov.au

Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

Dear Dr Craik

The Flinders University School of Education (SoE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning. We commend the Inquiry's objectives which seek to better understand and support the current and future need for Child Care and Early Childhood Learning in Australia. The Inquiry presents an important opportunity for focus to be placed on the provision of sustainable and equitable early childhood education and care in Australia.

The SoE's submission connects all Terms of Reference (ToR) for this Inquiry, and recommends in principle that:

- 1. Child care and early childhood learning quality, accessibility and flexibility are best-supported by an ongoing commitment to the quality assurance and funding endeavours commenced under the National Quality Framework (NQF).***
- 2. The NQF must be underpinned by operational and fiscal sustainability with respect to improving the qualifications, pay and conditions which are commensurate with the professional work early childhood educators undertake in our society.***

The SoE recognises that affordability, accessibility and flexibility of childcare and early childhood learning for children and families are critical issues that should and must drive this Inquiry. The SoE's expertise however, is with the impact on the quality of young children's everyday learning experiences. We maintain that the quality of early childhood education is key to children's health, wellbeing and development, both in the immediate and long term, and that this quality is underpinned by the staffing qualifications of the children's services sector.

The fiscal and operational sustainability of childcare and early childhood learning rests on the provision of high quality programs that are accessible, affordable and flexible. Any recommendations made by this Inquiry for funding or action however, must be cognisant of the overwhelming research that clearly documents the impact of high quality care on young children's learning experiences and the need for a stable workforce. Childcare and early childhood learning programs must be led by educators who are qualified and professionally recognised to ensure young children experience optimal learning opportunities and continuity of care. Research recognises that early childhood educators' qualifications make a significant and positive contribution to the learning environments young children experience and the outcomes they achieve across a range of domains (Key references are provided in the Bibliography). Further, consistency of care also underpins environments that are responsive, nurturing and stimulate young children's learning. Consistency of care necessitates a stable workforce in early learning and care that is appropriately recognised and remunerated.

The Terms of Reference (TOR) guiding this inquiry conclude with the statement that ‘the Commission will consider options *within current funding parameters*’ (p.3). This statement is of great concern given that Australia does not enjoy an enviable international reputation in relation to its provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Successive national and international reports (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006; Press & Hayes, 2000; UNICEF, 2008; Watson, 2012) point to the need for increased resourcing and coordinated ECEC policy at a national level if Australia’s reputation is to improve. Comparatively, in a UNICEF Report (2008), Australia was ranked at 23 out of 25 across a range of indicators of ECE provision. Australia spends 0.4% of its GDP on the provision of ECEC programs and services. This is an embarrassment in such a prosperous country when considered alongside the OECD average expenditure of 0.6% of GDP with some countries (e.g. Denmark contributing 1.7%) (UNICEF, 2008, p. 8).

Without significant fiscal and operational investment, access, affordability and quality in early childhood care and early learning will be undermined and compromised. The cost of childcare and early learning must always be considered alongside the importance of having a stable, qualified early childhood educators. Significant investment in the early years is about providing children with access to quality learning and care, regardless of socio-economic and other factors that leave children vulnerable to inequitable learning opportunities. The effects of high quality early learning and care are lasting and therefore funding for the sector must always be considered against the aim of achieving optimal outcomes for children. Children’s best interests must always be the touchstone for any reform. Attending to the accessibility, affordability, flexibility and *quality* of young children’s learning and care experiences is a social responsibility that will yield significant short- and long-term social, economic, education, health and productivity dividends for our nation.

If you would like any further information, or wish to discuss this submission further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely
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