

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



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Executive Summary:

The development of a sustainable future for early education and care is a challenge that is going to require not only changes to public policy, changes to workplace structure and operation and substantial financial investment but also social investment and social change. The education of our children does not start at primary school it starts at birth. It is important to note that education here is not taken to mean formal, structured learning as we would expect at primary school but rather child focused learning – child directed learning through play where families and educators guide children's learning through the provision of age appropriate experiences and materials that engage, challenge and broaden a child's experience of the world around them in a safe and supported manner.

"in the first five years of life, education and care giving cannot and should not be thought of as distinctly different activities....."care" for an infant or young child can and should do several things at once." (J.Sparling, 2010)

Extensive research and evidence from around the world supports current understandings of the efficacy of quality early learning programs. This is, amongst others, demonstrated in the Abecedarian studies and articulated in the Heckman equation the greatest benefit and highest rate of return to individual children, families and society is to invest in quality early childhood development for disadvantaged children and their families. (J.Sparling, 2010; J Heckman 2012; E. Alberici 2012)

The Council of Australian Government's *investing in the early years—the national early childhood development strategy* has the vision that 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' If Australia fails to make a paradigm shift this vision will not be realised and the costs borne by our children, our society and ultimately our economy will continue to increase.



About the YMCA of Canberra:

The YMCA is a vibrant, not for profit charity active in Canberra since 1941. The Y delivers programs that proactively change people's lives. In everything we do, we focus on healthy living, developing young people & families and support for the disadvantaged. Our programs and services are accessible to all.

The YMCA in Canberra has extensive knowledge and experience within the field of early childhood and currently;

Operate 2 Early learning centres - Belconnen license for 90, Jamison license for 63

By the end of 2014 will be operating 2 additional early learning centres – Gungahlin licensed for 90 and Holder licensed for 124

By 2015 will be operating another early learning centre for 90 places – Holt West Belconnen

Operate a playschool 4 days a week

Conduct physi-kids programs 6 days a week for children aged 3months-5years

Run a number of Early Intervention programs such as rhyming connections, Baby Play, "Eat play love life" and Playschool

Operate a range of OSHC services - 16 After School Care, 5 Before School Care and 8 Vacation Care services.

Have staff representatives ACECQA, Vice President Early Childhood Australia ACT Branch , Executive Network ACT, OSHCACT, Community Directors Association ACT

Are recognised by YMCA's Australia as the lead YMCA provider of Early Education and Care thus provide resources, leadership and assistance, in this field, to other YMCA's around the country.

YMCA of Canberra Submission:**- The contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development**

Accessibility and affordability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) effects workforce participation, particularly for women. The increasing financial reality for many Australian families (whatever their composition) is that the adults in the family need to work in order to meet the basic living requirements of the family. If current accessibility and affordability of ECEC drops then an impact will be felt within the workforce and across the economy. Not-for-profits and government support agencies will experience even greater demand for their services at a time when they are already struggling to meet demand as parents will be unable to return to the workforce due to a lack of accessibility &/or affordability of ECEC. If, as has been suggested, the demand for ECEC continues to grow within the ACT then it is paramount that a way forward is found which preserves, or indeed improves, its accessibility and affordability for families.

Until workers are able to make truly flexible and family friendly choices around work, without compromising their career path, opportunity for promotion or the quality of work assigned to them, the choices Australian families will make in regards to early education and care will remain grounded in the needs of employers and workplaces and not in the needs of their families. One could question the priorities of a society where the choices families make about the education and care of their children during their formative early years is driven by the demands of the workplace.

Recommendations:

Campaign for and drive cultural and social change to obtain truly flexible and family friendly workplaces this process may include; implementation of public policy, workplace regulations, leading by example, avenues for raise concerns around inflexible or un-family friendly workplaces & practices.

A combined government assistance scheme that supports families choices to use ECEC services minimises confusion for families around fees, rebates and out of pocket expenses and facilitates clear and transparent pathways to accessing ECEC for all families and for disadvantaged families in particular.

Current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance

The YMCA of Canberra's waiting list figures indicate that there is still an incredibly high demand for placements in ECEC centres. The majority of the waiting list demand is for children under 3 years of age. This reflects the ratio requirements of 1:4 or 1:5 for children this age which consequently limits the availability of placements. In addition there are a greater number of providers and therefore positions for children aged 4-5 as they are eligible to enter the ACT Government pre-school system.

Currently we see within the ACT that a proportion of ECEC is undertaken by grandparents. The YMCA believes that the relative proportion of education and care undertaken by grandparents will decrease over the next few decades. The reasons are twofold; with increasing retirement age grandparents are quite likely to still be in fulltime work during the first five years of their grandchildren's lives and shifts in generational attitudes and priorities. If we are to see more families turning to not-for-profit or commercial providers for ECEC in the future then it is imperative that we build a sustainable future for the sector that is grounded in high quality education and care and driven by social policy.

Training funding within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector has been prioritised over recent years. Unfortunately the number of educators gaining qualifications has not translated to a larger pool of qualified educators within the ACT wishing to work in the ECEC sector. It appears that many educators are gaining an initial qualification as a "stepping stone" into further study and/or career progression that enables them to work outside of the ECEC sector.

As the need for ECEC continues to grow new facilities will require development. The cost of purchasing land and building a centre is often prohibitive for community organisations and if land is auctioned community organisations are unable to compete in the commercial market. The YMCA believes that maintaining a good mix of community and commercial ECEC facilities in the ACT is imperative. The government has a role to play in this process and it is particularly relevant in light of new development areas such as Molonglo etc. It appears that a community organisation can undertake a build of an ECEC at less than half the cost incurred by government for a similar build (Attachment 1). If this is correct then the government would be wise to look at alternative models, as opposed to government build and tender process for management, for the development of ECEC facilities. Models which decrease government expenditure, support community organisations, support the economy and support families in areas where ECEC facilities are needed would be a better option.

Recommendations:

Extensive review and change to public education policy. Recognition of 0-5 education and care as an integral component to the Australian education system not isolated from it.

Drive a paradigm shift so that the education and care of 0-5 years olds is seen as an integral component of the Australian education system. Such a shift would contribute to a sustainable future for the ECEC sector, underpin the national economy, strengthen and support community and secure quality ECEC programs and educators. The status of the ECEC sector would elevate to that of an equal colleague of the primary education sector, this will be reflected in qualifications and enhanced wages, and the sector will achieve a professional status and be an occupation pursued in its own right with clear career pathways and development.

Through public policy and all information promulgated by government drive a change in the terminology and language used to refer to ECEC. Utilise changes in terminology and language to facilitate change in the social perception of the role & long term value of quality ECEC within our society. I.e. childcare worker becomes an educator, childcare centre /long day care centre are early education and care centres or early learning centres.

Government look at alternative models for the development of new ECEC facilities in areas of need within the ACT. Models may include direct land grants in appropriate areas for community organisations, some form of shared cost with gradual transfer of asset over time.

The capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children

A lack of coordinated planning that determines where providers are able to gain approval to build ECEC services in the ACT may result in families from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage struggling to access ECEC services. Providers, requiring a return on their investment, will be more inclined to build within areas of economic advantage where higher fees for service provision may be charged and accepted.

Attendance at pre-school facilitates a more positive and satisfactory transition to school for children and for families. Early childhood education establishes the foundations for children that facilitate a positive transition to school and are the building blocks essential for success in life; cognitive skills, sociability, motivation, self-control. For many children from disadvantaged environments formal early childhood education such as pre-school is likely to be their greatest chance to develop these building blocks. (J. Heckman, 2012) These children are more likely to not have attended any ECEC services prior to pre-school. Children whom have not attended preschool often enter the first year of schooling behind their peers in many aspects of development. This changes their learning experience and for many is the start of always being “a step behind” at school. For this reason it is imperative that the pre-school system is accessible and affordable to all families and that disadvantaged families in particular are encouraged and supported to send their children to pre-school.

While the focus has been on ECEC services, the YMCA believes that other early intervention programs should also be considered for the value they can add to assisting families provide quality learning, care and development opportunities for their children. It is these programs which can often successfully be targeted at disadvantaged sectors of our community who may not be accessing formal ECEC

services such as early learning centres. These programs where targeted and delivered well within the ACT could make a significant difference in the quality of early childhood learning for children from CALD families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, families at significant economic disadvantage and families with teenage mothers.

Recommendations:

ACT government work across departments to develop some coordinated planning regulations and parameters around where ECEC services may be established and the size and type of service which may best suit that community.

Develop and roll out a government campaign around preschool attendance considering in particular how the campaign will best reach disadvantaged families within the ACT community. Consider developing support liaison teams for specific disadvantaged sectors of the community who can assist and support families through the process of enrolling and attending pre-school.

Make available more long term (3-5yr) funding for the development and delivery of quality early intervention programs within the community.

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

Scandinavian – Sweden, Netherlands

New Zealand

Options - within existing funding parameters - for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances

We recognise that ACT Education and Training Preschool services are governed by the National Education and Care Regulations and therefore the NQF. In the ACT however, there is still a division between working conditions in non government ECEC services and government based preschools. Degree qualified Early Childhood Teachers (ECT) will continue to prioritise employment with the Department of Education and Training as long as the employment conditions and the professional status attached to such positions are so much more favourable than those in non government ECEC services.

The current pattern for pre-school attendance across the ACT does not encourage increased workforce participation. To accommodate 15 hours of preschool most pre-schools across the ACT have a fortnightly pattern where children attend 2 days one week and 3 days the next. While the YMCA supports the governments initiative to increase preschool hours for children it also believes that this fortnightly system actively discourages increased workforce participation. A primary carer wishing to return to work can only be available 2 days a week between 9am-3pm unless a prospective employer is willing to work in with the 2 day: 3 day fortnightly pattern of preschool. This severely limits employment prospects. Families whom are already in the workforce and choose to move to a government preschool must cut back their working hours to fit in with the preschool day rather than a working day.

Families are entitled to 15hrs free pre-school in a government preschool yet families who choose to remain in non government services have no such entitlement yet this choice is often made in order to maintain workforce participation.

Recommendations

A new model for the pre-school system should be considered. Options may include; Co-location of ECEC centres with pre-schools and schools which would enable a model of extended hours of care; universal access to 15hrs free pre-school education to be delivered within non government ECEC services by qualified early childhood teachers. This will enable families to choose extended hours of care should they wish to work a 9-5pm day and pay for the hours outside the universal 15hrs access.

Disparity between conditions for preschool qualified educators in ECEC services and government preschools needs to be addressed. The first recommendation above may provide a solution to this disparity.

Universal access to 15hrs preschool should be available to all families in non government ECEC services or government services where the conditions of a qualified pre-school teacher and an appropriate pre-school curriculum are met.

The impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade.

The YMCA supports the introduction of the NQF and regulatory change as a means to ensure high quality ECEC across the country. Regulation changes have had a positive effect raising the professional standard of the industry. The benefits for children and families, in regards to providing suitable environments, individual child profiling, meaningful programming and community/school connectivity, have been significant.

While the YMCA fully supports minimum qualification requirements within the industry there are aspects of this that are challenging within the ACT; the minimum requirement within OSHC to coordinate or be 2nd in charge at a service is a Cert 4 in Children's Services. A prerequisite to this qualification is completion of a Cert 3. The majority of our employees in OSHC are university students studying a Bachelor of Education. There is no value to these students of increasing their study load to undertake a cert 3 and cert 4 in order to be eligible to coordinate an OSCH service. For these students working within OSHC is a "temporary" job whilst completing their studies. Sourcing and retaining employees at a coordinator or 2nd in charge level is of significant concern within the industry. Without some change to the regulations this is going to be an ongoing challenge for the industry and exemptions will be "normal" operating mode rather than the exception.

Overall the introduction of the NQF has been beneficial to the OHSC industry. The YMCA supports the NQF from the prospective that families and children will benefit from the fact that all providers within the industry are required to work towards continual improvement and providing the highest quality care for families. In the area of Rating and Assessment the YMCA, as a charity renting facilities within schools,

has difficulties meeting some of the required areas to achieve high results in all Quality Areas. In particular Quality Area 3, Physical Environments and Quality Area 6, Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities.

YMCA OSHC values the strength of the 1 educator to 11 child ratios currently in place and regulation of the industry. The YMCA firmly believes that deregulation or increased ratios would result in loss of quality care and compromise the safety and learning of our children. OSHC is an extension of the education system which has arisen over the years to meet the needs of working families. Our economy needs families to maintain full participation within the workforce. The YMCA does not believe that families will maintain full participation in the workforce if the cost of this is substandard care for their children in an unregulated industry where large “for profit” providers can move in and be free to focus on the profit to shareholders and not the health and wellbeing of the children in their care.

There is a need for certain level of infrastructure to support quality delivery of the NQF. The YMCA has restructured its Children's Services unit, including increasing the number of positions within the administration area to better meet the demands that have arisen as a result of new regulations (Attachment 3). As a charity organisation this cost impacts directly on the YMCA's ability to deliver its wide range of programs and services that meet community needs but are not financially viable on their own. This includes operating ASC/BSC services for smaller schools or for schools who are just implementing a new OSHC service and it takes a few years for the numbers in attendance to build. OSHC services with small attendance numbers often run at deficit. As an organisation focused on meeting community need the YMCA offsets the costs of smaller services with the larger services it delivers. Some of this financial burden could be offset with a government policy around rents for OSCH within ACT government schools.

Recommendations

Reconsider the minimum qualifications within the regulations, giving thought to allowing RPL for students undertaking a Bachelor of Education such that students moving towards their final years of study may be eligible to coordinate OSHC services. Considering if individuals who hold a Cert 3 or equivalent (RPL Bachelor Ed.) could be eligible for 2nd in charge at an OSHC service. This would also enable more flexibility for people working within the early learning setting to work within either the early learning setting or the OSHC environment with the option to up skill to a Cert 4 and become a coordinator.

The process for Ratings and Assessments should take into consideration the ability of services to meet certain criteria where the service is occupying a rented facility at a school and has limited control over those criteria.

Deregulation is not considered within the OSHC industry, this would be a step backwards and not forwards for the future of Australia.

Government effectively resources the continued implementation and development of national guidelines, regulations and quality standards to drive sector reforms that will enhance the quality and consistency of early childhood education and care across the country

The ACT government develops a clear policy around rental for OSHC services, this policy should reflect the size of the service in recognition that a not for profit provider has less capacity to pay rent in services with small attendance numbers. Such a policy should also recognise that rents may need to be on a sliding scale for the first few years of a newly operating service.

Summary of YMCA of Canberra Recommendations

ACT government to campaign for and drive cultural and social change to obtain truly flexible and family friendly workplaces this process may include; implementation of public policy, workplace regulations, leading by example, avenues for raise concerns around in- flexible or un-family friendly workplaces & practices.

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