

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

5 September 2014

We, the undersigned **early childhood education and care expert academics and pre-service teachers** at The University of Newcastle **reject the following draft recommendations** of the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning:

General qualification and ratio requirements

- No. of early childhood teachers determined by no. of children aged 4 – 5 years (7.2)
- All jurisdictions to adopt national qualification and ratio requirements (7.3)
- Meeting of ratios to be determined by average staffing levels, not at all times (7.5)
- Unqualified staff to be counted in ratios three months prior to commencing a qualification (7.5)
- All jurisdictions to adopt national qualification and ratio requirements (7.3)
- Meeting of ratios to be determined by average staffing levels, not at all times (7.5)
- Unqualified staff to be counted in ratios three months prior to commencing a qualification (7.5)

Children aged birth – 3 years

- All educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III or equivalent (7.2)
- ACECQA should remove the requirements that persons with early childhood teacher qualification must have practical experience for children aged birth to 24 months.

Preschool vs Long day care

- The removal of dedicated preschools from the NQF (7.9)

We think the Commission has failed to address the vast evidence base around the value of early education and has proposed a childcare solution that will deny high quality education and care for all, and especially for the most disadvantaged in our society. A wealthy country deserves a quality system for all its youngest citizens.

We challenge the body of research evidence the Commission has put forward. The PC's research evidence is highly selective, misinterpreted and misappropriated with the aim of underpinning the Abbott government's financial agenda. We stress and point to the existence of robust and internationally acknowledged research evidence and call for the preparation of a more rigorous and neutral report.

We call on the Abbott Government to tell the Productivity Commission to develop a solution that enables all children and their families to participate in a world-class early education and care system.

Our reasons are the following:

1. Reducing qualification requirements will reduce the quality of care, especially for the more vulnerable under 3 years olds.

Strong international evidence shows that high quality education and care hinges upon highly qualified teachers and high teacher and child ratios for all children from birth, and that children between birth to three need qualified teachers. Staff-child ratios "is generally the most consistent predictor of high-quality learning environments" (OECD, 2012, p. 35). The E4kids study demonstrates that Robust staff-child ratios and particularly the employment of early childhood teachers ensures high quality. High staff-child ratios enable safe environments, better communication with parents and other professionals, mitigates workplace stress and staff turnover (Whitebook, 2003). Early childhood teachers facilitate curriculum that extends children's learning, regular, meaningful interactions, children being more persistent with tasks, children's more co-operative behaviour, and for children to be less likely to wander aimlessly (Whitebook, 2003; Kelley & Camilli, 2007). The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPI) Study (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2003) proved that children with early childhood teachers had higher quality education, highest pre-reading and social skills, opportunities for higher level thinking, and strongest developmental outcomes. Other international studies have reported similar findings (Burchinal et al., 2002; NICHD, 2002; Pianta et al., 2005; Seung-Hee et al., 2013). Investigating Quality (IQ) study has found that the elements that support sustained high quality ECEC in long day care settings are early childhood teacher provided pedagogical support, mentoring and leadership.

References:

- OECD. (2012). *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264123564-en>
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http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/E4Kids/
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- Effective Provision of Preschool Education Study (UK)
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P., Melhuish, E. C., & Elliot, K. (2003). Technical Paper 10: Intensive case studies of practice across the foundation stage. London: The Institute of Education.
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- Burchinal, M. R., Cryer, D., Clifford, R. M., & Howes, C. (2002). Caregiver training and classroom quality in child care centres. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(1), 2-11.

NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2002). Child-care structure -> process -> outcome: Direct and indirect effects of child-care quality on young children's development. *Psychological Science*, 13(3), 199-206.

Pianta, R., Howes, C., Burchinal, Bryant, D., Clifford, R., Early, D., & Barbarin, O. (2005). Features of pre-kindergarten programs, classrooms, and teachers: Do they predict observed classroom quality and child-teacher interactions? *Applied Developmental Science*, 9(3), 144-159. doi: 10.1207/s1532480xads0903_2

Seung-Hee, C. S., Kyong-Ah, K., Hyun-Joo, J., & Soo-Young, H. (2013). Head Start classrooms and children's school readiness benefit from teachers' qualifications and ongoing training. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 42, 525-553. doi: 10.1007/s10566-013-9213-2

Kelley, P., & Camilli, G. (2007). *The impact of teacher education on outcomes in center-based early childhood education programs: A meta-analysis*. Retrieved August 6, 2014 from <http://nieer.org/resources/research/TeacherEd.pdf>.

Fenech, M., Harrison, L., Press, F., & Sumsion, J. (2010). Contributors to quality long day care: Findings from six case study centres. Bathurst: Charles Sturt University.

In summary and based on the above evidence our response is:

- We call on the Abbott government to prioritise the development of a high quality early childhood education system for Australia that includes university qualified teachers for all children 0-5 years of age.
- We advocate for recommendations that put children's wellbeing and development at the centre of policy reform.
- We reject the assumption that robust ratios and staff qualifications are a burden. This idea places economic considerations before children's wellbeing and learning.
- We reject all recommendations that will lead to a watering down of ratio and qualification requirements.
- We support national consistency over regulation that is aspirational.
- We call for greater transparency and accountability of use of evidence, data collection and reporting.
- We strongly support that early childhood teachers need birth to 2 years old practicum placement during pre-service teacher education.

2. Linking subsidy eligibility to mainly paid work related needs or problems fails to recognise wider children and family needs for company and learning and disadvantages further families from disadvantaged backgrounds

Parental activity test goes counter to research evidence in regards to the benefits of ECEC for children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. A long-term strategy should have *children's needs, rights and interests* at its core and not exclude children on the basis of parental 'activity' (UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

- *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989)
<https://www.unicef.org.au/Discover/What-we-do/Convention-on-the-Rights-of-the-Child/childfriendlycrc.aspx>.
 Article 27. Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs.
 Article 28. Children have the right to an education.
 Article 29. Education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full.
 Article 39. Children who have been neglected or abused should receive special help to restore their self-respect.

Supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable children into high quality ECEC serves our long-term national goals far more effectively than excluding them. Investing early into high quality ECEC has significant economic and social payoffs. ECEC supports parents and boosts female employment. Heckman's study shows that a dollar spent on early education generates higher returns on investment than the same spending on schooling, every dollar saves 7 later. All children gain from quality ECEC however disadvantaged children have the greatest potential to benefit from high quality ECEC. Poor quality ECEC provisions have lasting detrimental effects on children's development.

References:

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- McCain, M, Mustard, F, & Shanker, S. 2007 Early years study 2: putting science into action, Council for Early Child Development, Canada
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- Shonkoff, JP, Samuel, F & Gingold, R. 2005 The Science of Early Childhood Development: closing the gap between what we know and what we do. Colloquium presentation 30 November, Harvard University Cambridge MA.
- Shore, R. 1997 Rethinking the Brain: new insights into early development, Families and Work Institute, NY.
<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/48980282.pdf>

In summary and based on the above evidence our response is:

- We advocate that all children have the right to high quality early childhood education and care.
- We strongly assert that children from disadvantaged background should be provided by high quality free early childhood education and care subsidized by the government.

3. The removal of dedicated preschools from the NQF (7.9) will lead to a bifurcated system the NQF opposed.

It is well established that learning begins from birth. As such, an integration of education and care is regarded as fundamental to quality early learning experiences that support children's wellbeing, learning and development.

References:

- OECD. (2001). *Starting strong: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.
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- Cheeseman, S., & Torr, J. (2009). From ideology to productivity: Reforming early childhood education and care in Australia. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 3(1), 61-74.
- Kaga, Y., Bennett, J. & Moss, P. (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childhood care and education within education*. Paris: UNESCO

In summary and based on the above evidence our response is:

- The key strength of the NQF is that it provides a nationally consistent and inspirational regulatory framework under which all early learning and care services are to operate. We assert that this strength should be maintained.

Our response in summary:

The Commission's recommendations, if implemented will:

- Severely reduce the quality of early education and care,
- De-professionalize the field, and
- Reduce the accessibility of early childhood education and care for many, and especially for the disadvantaged.

We do not consider these recommendations to be in keeping with the Productivity Commission's role of enabling "governments (to) make better policies, in the long term interest of the Australian community" (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. ii). We want to see children's services restored to being a valued and valuable part of the community and call on the government to ask the Productivity Commission to seriously review their recommendations to meet the needs for a national high quality early childhood education and care system.

We draw the Productivity Commission's attention to the recent finding of Pricewaterhouse Coopers (2011), that "...The National Quality Framework quality standards are not ambitious, they fall short of the precedents set by ECEC systems overseas in terms of the qualifications required by early childhood staff and compare poorly with those quality standards that are taken for granted in the school education system".

And last but not least we add that according to most recent OECD figures, as at 2009 Australia ranked 32nd from 34 partner countries on ECE expenditure as a percentage of GDP (<http://www.oecd.org/australia/EAG2012%20-%20Country%20note%20-%20Australia.pdf>). Policy initiatives to support children's equitable access to quality early learning and care experiences necessitate more substantive, long term investment, with due regard to children's rights, wellbeing and interests. Early childhood education and care expert academics at The University of Newcastle:

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