



Mission Australia

**Mission Australia's contribution to the Productivity Commission's study of  
Australia's Early Childhood Development Workforce**

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To obtain further information or discuss this submission please contact:

**Marie Howard**

**National Director, Early Learning Services**

Mission Australia

E: [howardm@missionaustralia.com.au](mailto:howardm@missionaustralia.com.au)

T: (03) 8615 2210

## ***Summary and recommendations***

- As a major provider of early childhood development and integrated family support services, Mission Australia's experiences resonate with the issues outlined in the *Issues Paper* and confirm that there is an urgent need for reform. We applaud the instigation of this study and in our view the scope of the study is comprehensive and appropriate.
- However, the above notwithstanding, we note that the purpose of the sector is to achieve quality outcomes for children and this necessarily implicates other professions (and labour markets), most notably the higher education and vocational education and training sectors.
- With regard to the supply side of early childhood development workforce, as the *Issues Paper* recognises it is clear that the problem facing the sector is about much more than the development of human capital alone.
- To this end, we see the major task that lies ahead as one of transforming the early childhood development workforce from a secondary labour market sector characterised by (generally) low skill, low pay, precarious employment with relatively few protections and benefits, into a primary labour market sector that is the antithesis of this and distinguished by high skill levels, competitive salaries, job stability, and a correspondingly high status accorded to workers and healthy levels of morale.
- In Mission Australia's experience, the ECD sector is currently a sector which does not inspire or foster the type of movement into and out of its boundaries that strengthens and enhances its workforce. Instead, what we typically see is our more highly skilled and qualified workers crossing over into more desirable primary labour market sectors, such as kindergarten and primary teaching. We rarely, if ever, welcome workers moving into the early childhood development space from primary sectors of the labour market and we find it particularly challenging to attract degree trained teachers to work in long day care given the superior pay and conditions in other segments of the labour market. Many workers leave this sector if they have the wherewithal to move on to 'better' jobs; they do not seek to enter it. This is a telling reflection of the esteem in which the sector is currently held by other segments of the labour market.
- As an employer of early childhood development workers, we note, however, that many workers in the sector are passionate about their vocation, have good foundational skills, are keen to seize opportunities to learn and make impressive ambassadors for the sector. This bodes well for the future of the sector.
- Nevertheless, employers in the ECD sector grapple with difficult challenges that centre around workforce issues. They manage complex workplaces with substantial regulatory requirements. They also seek to develop and embed curriculum frameworks that are founded on carefully chosen pedagogical theory and then find themselves needing to educate families and communities (and sometimes their own staff) about their learning philosophy and what this looks like in practice. In short, employers tackle a range of complex challenges with what is commonly acknowledged to be one of the lowest paid, low skilled workforces in Australia.
- Our experiences as an employer resonate with others' experiences in the research literature: workers are often poorly informed and equipped when they enter the sector and as a result 'take flight' when they encounter the challenges of working in the early childhood development sector (see Bretherton, 2010). In our view, this clearly points to an issue with the quality of training supplied through VET channels.

- Generally speaking, we find the quality of vocational education and training to be enormously variable. Given the rate of attrition in the industry, the lean supply of adequately trained labour will have a profound impact on entry level positions in this sector. We also observe that this situation further complicates the already limited career pathways within the sector and compounds the issue of staff retention.
- In Mission Australia's view, until the characteristics and conditions of the early childhood development labour market mimic those of its currently superior secondary market (in terms of benefits, conditions, pay and status), little sustainable change is likely to occur. This means that, in time, it is important to address all of the interrelated short-comings covered in the *Issues Paper*, including raising the status of the workforce, raising skill levels, and raising pay. This in turn will impact on the quality of EC education and care provided to children and the subsequent outcomes for those children.
- No matter how keenly individual employers may wish to address the low pay issue it is not possible to do this in any meaningful way in isolation of a more systemic change effort, as the current environment militates against acceptable ways of passing on or subsidising the increased costs associated with this. Nevertheless, it is both fair and just, and critical to the future status of the early childhood development workforce, that the wages of its workers be raised. This means that the sector and government still need to resolve the question of who bears the associated costs. To this end, we note that the vast majority of Mission Australia's clients experience financial hardship and disadvantage and increasing the costs of early childhood care and education has important equity and social justice implications which we would strongly argue must be taken into account in future discussions that impact directly and indirectly on pricing structures.
- Following on from the above, in our view, the low status of childcare workers can largely be attributed to the low pay, the low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) required to undertake relevant studies, and the questionable quality of training and education that is provided to students.
- However, notwithstanding the above, Mission Australia believes that there are far deeper and more grave obstructions that prevent the elevation of the status of the workforce. In order to address the status crisis the sector is currently facing the sector must restore, reassert and make visible the rich intellectual foundations of the work of early childhood development workers to a broad range of stakeholders, especially those in circles outside of policy and academia. This might be achieved through a suite of coordinated strategies (including social marketing campaigns, reinvigorated jobs fairs, further promotion of research findings in multi-disciplinary settings and publications, parent education initiatives, and so on).
- Mission Australia underscores the importance of scrutinising the provision of vocational education and training for three reasons:
  - 1) Good quality training can have a significant and direct impact on the skill levels of the early childhood development workforce and is one of the most important solutions to the supply side of the problems captured in the *Issues Paper*.
  - 2) The implementation of the new National Quality Framework provides an attractive business opportunity for Registered Training Organisations, whilst at the same time ECD employers and their workers will be under pressure – in terms of time and resources – to acquire the relevant qualifications. This is likely to be a problematic mix of circumstances. We feel strongly that the content and quality of the supply of training as it currently stands requires reviewing; the need for such a review (and possibly additional quality checks) is arguably more acute given the impending substantial increase in demand for training, and it would seem urgent considering the

very future of the sector is at stake and vocational education and training is a central plank in its restoration.

- 3) Ensuring that training meets the current and future needs and challenges facing the early childhood development workforce is one of the more practical steps that can be taken, and it can be taken relatively swiftly.
- Given the relative scarcity of data pertaining to the characteristics of the family support services sector, we wish to register our support for the inclusion of family support services in the scope of the Productivity Commission's study and the importance of ensuring this sector retains a place in this study going forward. While we unreservedly support the current focus on early childhood education, families are an integral part of children's learning and development and we feel it is important to keep the family support services sector visible amidst these important discussions as this will help to keep the idea of integration in focus.
  - In Mission Australia's experience there appears to be significant mobility into and out of the early childhood development sector for workers in the family support services segment, relative to early childhood education and care workers. Therefore, we note that pay and conditions in both the early childhood development sector (relative to other sectors) and other labour markets are likely to have significant effects on the supply of family support service workers within the ECD sector.
  - We note that this mobility does not constitute the type of labour flows and transitions that enhance and strengthen the sector. This has especially problematic implications for early intervention and integrated services and is concerning in view of the universally acknowledged benefits of integrated support and early intervention, and the overarching desire to move further towards integration, and away from a more separatist system. We draw attention, in particular, to the following implications:
  - Funding difficulties impact on the professional development opportunities for all workers in the early childhood development space. However, professional development and career opportunities are plentiful and more appealing in other sectors (such as the hospital system) for specialists such as occupational therapists, speech pathologists, and so on. For example, often, specialist workers are the sole technical expert in their given field in their workplace and they must source professional supervision elsewhere, for which funding may or may not be able to be provided. This drives specialists away from the early childhood development sector.
  - Similarly, the prevalence of part-time opportunities and the lack of permanent full-time positions (again, largely due to funding constraints) means that the early childhood development sector is, generally speaking, an unattractive proposition for candidates. Higher calibre candidates will find more appealing, full-time opportunities elsewhere, leaving the early childhood development sector with candidates who are less competitive in terms of experience and skills.
  - Similar to the issues affecting the early childhood development workforce more broadly (and noted above), pay parity is a significant barrier to recruiting and retaining specialist staff, as are the limited career pathways for these workers within the early childhood development sector.

## Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national, not for profit organisation that works within the community, employment and training sectors. Our services provide pathways to strong families and happy, healthy children, pathways away from homelessness, pathways through a successful youth, pathways for life and work-ready skills, and pathways to sustainable employment. In 2009-2010, our services supported more than 300,000 Australians in need. Mission Australia's Community Services helped 91,329 families and individuals across the country, while our Employment Solutions team supported almost 155,000 people to train for and gain employment; our Early Learning Services centres provided affordable childcare to 2,243 children.

We have been working for 150 years with people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion, motivated by a vision for a fairer Australia where all people feel included and valued and enjoy the support of their families and communities to realise their potential. Our commitment to providing pathways to strong families and happy, healthy children sees us working with a diverse range of children and their families across Australia in a variety of settings. While many of the programs Mission Australia delivers in this space might be classified as being of a 'tertiary' nature in that they provide support to children and families in crisis and/or dealing with chronic disadvantage and entrenched problems, a significant amount of our work is focused on early intervention, and increasingly we seek to make a difference in the early years.

To this end, with the collapse of ABC Learning in late 2008 we were presented with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to place thousands of young Australians on track early in life, and we now run 29 *Mission Australia Early Learning Services*. These operate predominantly in areas of disadvantage where a high percentage of children are considered to be developmentally vulnerable, according to the Australian Early Development Index. Our *Early Learning Centres* are underpinned by the philosophy that the years 0 to 5 are a critical time in the development of each child and our aim is to work closely and effectively with children and their families to ensure the best possible start in life. We provide a nurturing and stimulating environment where each child has the opportunity to learn and develop within a caring relationship. Our educators focus on establishing strong relationships with each child and their parents/carers so that they are able to understand and respond to the unique needs of each child and their family and provide experiences to address these needs.

The remaining 650 'viable' ABC Learning centres became part of the *GoodStart* consortium which Mission Australia invested in together with The Benevolent Society, Social Ventures Australia and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. *GoodStart* is a social enterprise which, through its network of centres, aims to achieve social change by providing high quality, accessible, affordable, community-connected childcare that promotes children's development and learning. However, Mission Australia has no role in the direct operation of these centres.

Mission Australia also delivers a range of services which fall into the domain identified in the Productivity Commission's *Issues Paper* as family support services. Some of these services include:

- *Pathways to Prevention*, an innovative crime prevention and early intervention partnership between Mission Australia and Griffith University. Operating as a family support service, *Pathways* supports families with children aged 4-12 and focuses on the transition to school in the Inala and Carole Park areas of Brisbane, two of the most disadvantaged urban areas in Queensland. It combines child-focused programs delivered through state preschools with services for families within a community development framework.
- We are also involved in delivering *Communities for Children*, both as a facilitating partner and direct service delivery agency, which is a prevention and early

intervention program for families with children up to 12 years of age who are at risk of disadvantage and who remain disconnected from childhood services.

- *Macarthur Early Childhood Intervention Service* (MECIS) is a Mission Australia service which provides specialised early childhood intervention for children from birth to school entry who have a diagnosed developmental delay or disability. The service operates in South West Sydney, an area characterised by pockets of extremely low socio-economic status and poor access to services. The majority of MECIS clients are from low socio-economic backgrounds, and many are from Aboriginal or Cultural and Linguistic Diverse backgrounds.
- The *Miller Pre-school and Early Childhood Intervention Service* has provided a range of educational programs for young children and their families for over 40 years. Based in Sydney's South-West, Miller supports children and their families who are often isolated because of their low socio-economic status and culturally diverse backgrounds.

### ***The focus of this submission***

As detailed above, Mission Australia entered the early learning space relatively recently. As a community organisation that has long worked with people experiencing social exclusion and entrenched, multiple disadvantage we are acutely aware of the importance of early care and learning and the challenges that individuals and families face later in life when early childhood conditions are less than optimal. We therefore see as one of our primary obligations to the children and families with whom we work the transformation of our recently acquired childcare services into centres that provide children with caring, transformational learning environments and enhance parents' and carers' capacity so that they can be critical partners in their children's learning journey.

These changes require significant shifts in practice, organisational policy, professional development and human resource strategies, and we are therefore in the unusual position of grappling with the majority of the supply side challenges outlined by the Productivity Commission in its *Issues Paper*, at scale. Drawing on the Commission's schematic representation of the early childhood development sector, we are also in the unique position of being able to juxtapose our workforces, since a significant segment of our labour force works with children and families, many of whom provide integrated family support services, but would not typically be categorised as early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers. We also have comparative experiences and insight in terms of geography and the different challenges this presents our colleagues in rural and remote communities, and their counterparts in urban settings.

These experiences have served to heighten our awareness of many of the issues at the heart of the Early Childhood Development workforce study, and it is the insights and challenges associated with our change effort, together with the comparative perspective we are able to apply to this matter, which we seek to share via this submission.

We therefore focus on a selected few questions raised by the Commission in its *Issues Paper* which we feel best equipped to contribute to; these tend to be those questions concerning the supply of early childhood development workers, and integrated and co-located service delivery. However, rather than repeating the questions contained in the *Issues Paper* we have organised our responses under higher level headings contained in this document.

## ***The early childhood development workforce***

Generally, our experiences as a major provider of early childhood development services resonate with the issues outlined in the *Issues Paper* and confirm that there is an urgent need for reform. We applaud the instigation of this study and in our view the scope of the study is sound.

While the bulk of our submission focuses on the early childhood education and care services sector, we would nevertheless like to voice our support for the inclusion of family support services in the scope of the Productivity Commission's study. We feel it is important to keep the family support services sector visible amidst these discussions as policy drivers continue to elevate the educative aspect of childcare, as this will help to keep the idea of integration in focus. While we unreservedly support the new focus on the educative aspects of early childhood development, families are an integral part of children's learning and development. By virtue of the work we do we see first hand the critical importance of the family environment – and particularly the parent/carer-child relationship – and the role this plays in the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. The literature also attests to this (see, for example, the CCCH, 2007). A good quality family environment is related to positive early childhood development, while relationships of poor quality and an insecure environment can have a detrimental impact on children's development in the long term.

The experiences of both our family support workers and our early childhood education and care workers bear out the findings of research which shows that well designed parenting programs can improve parent-child relationships, resulting in improved developmental outcomes for children. Further, outcomes for children are best when quality childcare is delivered in conjunction with programs for families or communities (Centre for Parenting and Research 2005; Homel et al. 2006). We know these services to be particularly important for families from disadvantaged backgrounds who typically face material and social stressors that put children at risk of poorer developmental outcomes. For all these reasons, part of Mission Australia's core business is the provision of integrated family support services and our early learning services have a focus on working in partnership with families.

As the discussion paper notes, the family support services sector employs a workforce drawn from a variety of occupations, with differing requirements in terms of qualifications and professional registration. As is also noted, while there is a 'wealth of data' (*Issues Paper*, p. 8) concerning the childcare and preschool workforces, there is no nationally consistent data collection about the characteristics of the family support services workforce. This is also known to be a challenge for community services more generally (Cortis et al. 2009). We draw attention to this as we recognise that this relative scarcity of data, compounded by the diversity of occupations included, will make the study of this sub-sector challenging. In the face of such challenges we wish to underscore the vital role this sector plays in early childhood development and the importance of ensuring it retains a place in this study going forward, despite the relative scarcity of data available.

In the absence of nationally consistent data collection processes, we offer the following observations about the family support services segment and how this intersects with the early childhood development workforce, based on our experiences as a provider of these services:

- As a whole, the community services sector is facing significant recruitment and retention issues such as high levels of turn-over, low pay, inadequate support and professional development, a high proportion of part-time workers and multiple job-holding (Cortis et al., 2009), all of which have both technical and managerial implications. Therefore, although we recognise that boundaries must be placed around the Commission's study and we feel the scope of the issues paper is both comprehensive and appropriate, we note that the purpose of the sector is to achieve quality outcomes for children and this implicates other professions (and labour markets), most notably the higher education and

vocational education and training sectors which we discuss in more detail in the body of this submission.

- Staff turnover has been said to be a ‘universal challenge’ for the Australian child care sector (Bretherton, 2010), and in our experience there appears to be yet a greater potential for mobility into and out of the early childhood development sector for workers in the family support services segment relative to early childhood education and care workers.
- Because of this greater mobility, workforce issues pertaining to other human service sectors are also of relevance to family support services workers.
- We note, too, that pay and conditions in the early childhood development sector relative to others are likely to have significant effects on the supply of family support service workers within the ECD sector, as more attractive pay and conditions in other sectors may draw these workers away from the ECD sector.
- As other sectors (such as the social and community services sector) also continue to agitate for higher pay, should they win substantial wage increases this may exacerbate wage disparities at a workplace level for integrated or co-located sites which employ workers from a range of early childhood development sub-sectors and will undoubtedly have ramifications for the supply and retention of workers. While many work places and settings depend upon the integration of the skills and knowledge of multiple occupations and therefore experience and successfully manage similar tensions, in the early childhood development sector this can sometimes result in curious situations. For example, it is not infrequent for centre directors (who in our experience typically have diploma-level qualifications) to earn less than the employees they manage or supervise (for example degree-qualified early childhood teachers). With the advent of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and School Age Care and its aim to ensure that there is at least one degree-qualified teacher per early childhood education and care centre, this situation will become increasingly common. Compared with other industries, this is a relatively unusual structural situation with its own set of remuneration, morale, incentive, career pathway and other human resource management challenges. As these workers are part of a complex system and these are not isolated occurrences, in the long run they may need to be resolved at an industry-wide level and hence we flag this as a potential issue for monitoring. We also refer the reader to our comments later in this paper regarding the challenges associated with raising pay levels.

### ***Key points and recommendations***

- As a major provider of early childhood development and integrated family support services, Mission Australia’s experiences resonate with the issues outlined in the *Issues Paper* and confirm that there is an urgent need for reform. We applaud the instigation of this study and in our view the scope of the study is comprehensive and appropriate.
- However, the above notwithstanding, we note that the purpose of the sector is to achieve quality outcomes for children and this necessarily implicates other professions (and labour markets), most notably the higher education and vocational education and training sectors.
- Given the relative scarcity of data pertaining to the characteristics of the family support services sector, we wish to register our support for the inclusion of family support services in the scope of the Productivity Commission’s study and the importance of ensuring this sector retains a place in this study going forward. While we unreservedly support the current focus on early childhood education, families are an integral part of children’s learning and development and we feel it is important to



keep the family support services sector visible amidst these important discussions as this will help to keep the idea of integration in focus.

- In Mission Australia's experience there appears to be significant mobility into and out of the early childhood development sector for workers in the family support services segment, relative to early childhood education and care workers. Therefore, we note that pay and conditions in both the early childhood development sector (relative to other sectors) and other labour markets are likely to have significant effects on the supply of family support service workers within the ECD sector. Given the openness of the Government towards the integration of the early childhood development workforce and services (which Mission Australia strongly supports), we note that this will be an important consideration going forward.

### ***Supply of Early Childhood Development workers***

As mentioned above, Mission Australia supports the scope of the *Issues Paper* and the breadth of the issues it canvasses. However, as we see it, the major task that lies ahead is one of transforming the early childhood development workforce from a secondary labour market sector characterised by (generally) low skill, low pay, precarious employment with relatively few protections and benefits into a primary labour market sector that is the antithesis of this and distinguished by high skill levels, competitive salaries, job stability, and a correspondingly high status accorded to workers and healthy levels of morale. We feel that clarifying this as the task at hand helps to shed valuable light on the scale of the challenge and systematic ways to go about stimulating change.

As the *Issues Paper* recognises, it is clear that the problem facing the sector is about much more than the development of human capital alone. While this is crucial, in our experience the early childhood development workforce is also profoundly affected by other, structural factors that must also be addressed if sustainable change is to occur. We note that one of the most influential structural factors is the structure of the service system itself (for example whether it is a 'separatist' system or a system that integrates welfare and education [Moss, 2000]) and, as Moss (2000, p. 8) notes, "the 'models' of early childhood work have major implications for training, pay and status". In this regard, as advocates for children and families and the early childhood development workforce we feel encouraged by the direction in which policy and practice in Australia is moving, and we support the new staffing requirements outlined in the National Quality Framework. We particularly support the movement towards the integration of education and care, as evidence from abroad suggests that this is not only associated with higher quality outcomes for children, but also more rigorous training of workers and correspondingly higher levels of pay and status (see for example, Morris, 2000, and Bretherton, 2010).

In our experience, some of the hardest evidence of structural problems facing the early childhood development sector is the fact that, currently, it is a sector which does not inspire or foster the type of movement into and out of its boundaries that strengthens and enhances its workforce. Instead, we compete with traditional teaching roles where teachers have generous non contact time for program planning and school holiday leave of up to 12 weeks. This sees our more highly skilled and qualified workers crossing over into these more desirable primary labour market sectors (such as kindergarten and primary teaching). We rarely, if ever, welcome workers moving into the early childhood development space from primary sectors of the labour market. This is a telling reflection of the esteem in which the sector is currently held by other segments of the labour market.

Once workers with ‘cross-over capability’ enter the teaching system, imperfect though this may be, they find that in addition to far superior levels of pay (which is one of the primary attractions away from the early childhood development sector) this system also has basic structures in place to facilitate pay progression, more professional and career development opportunities, more porous boundaries that allow movement laterally into different professional spheres such as policy and administration, and far superior benefits in terms of holiday allowances. There are few such attractions in the early childhood development sector.

It is also difficult to write about the early childhood development sector without noting that it consists of a workforce that is highly gendered. As others have observed, this is a particularly complex matter the implications of which have yet to be fully explored and are deserving of further attention (see Moss, 2000, for example). In the context of the Productivity Commission’s study, we feel it is relevant to note that when the gendered nature of this workforce is considered alongside the characteristics of secondary labour market sectors as outlined above, this clearly has implications for a particular subset of Australia’s population – generally young, unskilled women – and a whole set of accompanying social justice issues concerning the long-term financial security of this cohort. As things currently stand, this segment of the labour market is at risk of becoming effectively trapped in low-skill, low-pay work. As is now widely recognised, this is unacceptable considering that the importance of this work is now universally acknowledged and it is also well-understood that significant technical and other skills are required to do this work well.

Clearly, this ‘low-skill’ and ‘low status’ situation has ramifications for strengthening the early childhood development workforce. Employers who work in this space and aim to improve outcomes for young children manage complex workplaces with substantial regulatory requirements. They also seek to develop and embed curriculum frameworks that are founded on carefully chosen pedagogical theory and then find themselves needing to educate families and communities (and sometimes their own staff) about their learning philosophy and what this looks like in practice. In this regard, we note in particular an inordinate and growing aversion to the type of risk-taking that is a fundamental part of children’s exploration, discovery, spontaneity and learning, and a questionable preference for highly structured, ‘closed’ environments over experiential, open-ended learning environments.

Employers tackle all of the above challenges with one of the lowest paid, low skilled workforces in Australia. This notwithstanding, as one such employer, we feel it equally important to note that many workers in the early childhood development sector are passionate about their vocation, have good foundational skills, are keen to seize opportunities to learn and make impressive ambassadors for the sector. This bodes well for the future of the sector.

However, as noted by Bretherton (2010) in her recent case study of employers in the early childhood education and care industry, there are few feasible options available to employers who are interested in improving the skill levels of staff within this industry, and they both have grave implications for the supply side of the early childhood development workforce. Broadly speaking, employers in Bretherton’s study turned to two recruitment strategies in their efforts to upskill and retain staff, and both involved using extremely selective recruitment processes. They either engaged higher-skilled candidates or carefully screened candidates who displayed the aptitude and personal attributes that suggested they would be ‘worth’ the organisational commitment involved in training and supporting these employees. Despite an ostensibly adequate volume of trained labour emerging from the VET system we nevertheless feel pressed to find staff with the skills required to deliver quality outcomes for the children and families we work with, and with an adequate understanding of what working in this sector involves. As a result, our experiences resonate with Bretherton’s (2010) research: staff are often poorly informed and equipped when they enter the sector and as a result ‘take flight’ when they encounter the challenges of working in the early childhood development sector.

In our view, this clearly points to an issue with the quality of training supplied through the VET channels and our experience is largely consistent with that of the employers at the centre of Bretherton's case study. Generally speaking, we find the quality of vocational education and training to be enormously variable. As Bretherton notes, given the rate of attrition in the industry the lean supply of adequately trained labour will have a profound impact on entry level positions in this sector. We also observe that this situation further complicates the already limited career pathways within the sector and compounds the issue of staff retention.

Quite simply, employers in the early childhood development sector cannot overcome these barriers alone. To this end, we offer the following observations:

- Until the characteristics and conditions of the early childhood development labour market mimic those of its currently superior secondary market, little sustainable change is likely to occur. This means that, in time, it is important to address all of the interrelated shortcomings covered in the *Issues Paper*, including raising the status of the workforce, attracting high-potential candidates (consider, for example, that the current Australian Tertiary Admission Rank required for the Diploma of Children's Services is 45-50), raising expected and actual skill levels and raising pay. Addressing all these matters will, in time, result in higher quality staff and better outcomes for children.
- No matter how keenly individual employers may wish to address the low pay issue it is not possible to do this in any meaningful way in isolation of a more systemic change effort. Raising pay means generating income to cover those increased costs, and in the absence of sufficient subsidies or other reliable and recurrent forms of funding (and until such time when this is viewed as a public responsibility) this means passing these costs on to parents and carers. It is simply not viable for providers to step into this breach alone; the current environment militates against this. For example, it is extremely difficult to pursue niche or differentiation strategies that justify increased costs in a context where improvements to the service offering are not well understood or appreciated by the consumer. While this may seem an extraordinary situation, we understand that the sector's weak ability to articulate its own intellectual traditions and worth is an acknowledged challenge amongst academic circles. However, more importantly, while there is no question about parents' and carers' wanting the best for their children, the vast majority have financial constraints (and certainly the majority of Mission Australia's clients fall into this category) that override other considerations and this has important equity and social justice implications which we would argue must be taken into account in future discussions that impact directly and indirectly on pricing structures. This mounts an argument for increased government subsidies for childcare to ensure that the children who need it most have access to high quality EC programs.
- In our experience, one of the inescapable issues that the sector must address concerns restoring and reasserting the rich intellectual foundations of the work of early childhood development workers in circles outside of policy and academia. We believe this lies at the core of the status crisis the sector currently faces. As policy makers, academics and our peers are well aware, this is not an atheoretical field of work, however the philosophical, theoretical, conceptual and technical knowledge and skills that underpin high quality care and education are largely invisible to the general public. Making these visible to a broad range of stakeholders through a suite of coordinated strategies (including social marketing campaigns, reinvigorated jobs fairs, further promotion of research findings in multi-disciplinary settings and publications, parent education initiatives, and so on) may help to redress this situation. To this end, we foresee that one of the most critical stakeholders in the future will be the general public, both for the purposes of attracting a broader swathe of the population to careers within the sector, and building an awareness of the real value of the work of the sector given tax payers are likely to be further implicated in the funding of the sector into the future.

- Finally, in relation to the supply side of the early childhood development workforce, we underscore the importance of scrutinising the provision of vocational education and training for three reasons:
  - The first is that good quality training can have a significant and direct impact on the skill levels of the early childhood development workforce and is one of the most important solutions to the supply side of the problems captured in the *Issues Paper*.
  - The second is that the roll-out of the new National Quality Framework makes for an attractive business opportunity for Registered Training Organisations. This is likely to see an increase in the number of RTOs adding the relevant qualifications to their scope, including those with less impressive credentials and experience. At the same time, employers and their workers will be under pressure – in terms of time and resources – to acquire the relevant qualifications. This is a problematic mix of circumstances. We feel strongly that the content and quality of the supply of training as it currently stands requires reviewing; the need for such a review (and possibly additional quality checks) is arguably more acute given the impending substantial increase in demand for training, and it would seem urgent considering the future of the sector is at stake and vocational education and training is a central plank in its restoration.
  - The third is that ensuring training meets the current and future needs and challenges facing the workforce is one of the more practical steps that can be taken.

#### ***Key points and recommendations***

- As noted earlier, Mission Australia supports the scope of the *Issues Paper* and the breadth of the issues it canvasses. As the *Issues Paper* recognises, it is clear that the problem facing the sector is about much more than the development of human capital alone.
- To this end, we see the major task that lies ahead as one of transforming the early childhood development workforce from a secondary labour market sector, characterised by (generally) low skill, low pay, precarious employment with relatively few protections and benefits, into a primary labour market sector that is the antithesis of this and distinguished by high skill levels, decent salaries, job stability, and a correspondingly high status accorded to workers and healthy levels of morale.
- Currently, the ECD sector is a sector which does not inspire or foster the type of movement into and outside its boundaries that strengthens and enhances its workforce. Instead, what we typically see is our more highly skilled and qualified workers crossing over into more desirable primary labour market sectors, such as kindergarten and primary teaching. We rarely, if ever, welcome workers moving into the early childhood development space from primary sectors of the labour market and we find it particularly challenging to attract degree trained teachers to work in long day care given the superior pay and conditions in other segments of the labour market. Many workers leave this sector if they have the wherewithal to move on to ‘better’ jobs; they do not seek to enter it. This is a telling reflection of the esteem in which the sector is currently held by other segments of the labour market.
- As an employer of early childhood development workers, we note, however, that many workers in the sector are passionate about their vocation, have good foundational skills, are keen to seize opportunities to learn and make impressive ambassadors for the sector. This bodes well for the future of the sector.
- Nevertheless, employers in the ECD sector grapple with difficult challenges that centre around workforce issues. They manage complex workplaces with substantial regulatory requirements. They also seek to develop and embed curriculum

frameworks that are founded on carefully chosen pedagogical theory and then find themselves needing to educate families and communities (and sometimes their own staff) about their learning philosophy and what this looks like in practice. In short, employers tackle a range of complex challenges with what is commonly acknowledged to be one of the lowest paid, low skilled workforces in Australia.

- Our experiences as an employer resonate with others' experiences in the research literature: workers are often poorly informed and equipped when they enter the sector and as a result 'take flight' when they encounter the challenges of working in the early childhood development sector (see Bretherton, 2010). In our view, this clearly points to an issue with the quality of training supplied through the VET channels.
- Generally speaking, we find the quality of vocational education and training to be enormously variable. Given the rate of attrition in the industry, the lean supply of adequately trained labour will have a profound impact on entry level positions in this sector. We also observe that this situation further complicates the already limited career pathways within the sector and compounds the issue of staff retention.
- In Mission Australia's view, until the characteristics and conditions of the early childhood development labour market mimic those of its currently superior secondary market (in terms of benefits, conditions, pay and status), little sustainable change is likely to occur. This means that, in time, it is important to address all of the interrelated short-comings covered in the *Issues Paper*, including raising the status of the workforce, raising skill levels, and raising pay. This in turn will impact on the quality of EC education and care provided to children and the subsequent outcomes for those children.
- No matter how keenly individual employers may wish to address the low pay issue it is not possible to do this in any meaningful way in isolation of a more systemic change effort, as the current environment militates against acceptable ways of passing on or subsidising the increased costs associated with this. Nevertheless, it is both fair and just, and critical to the future status of the early childhood development workforce, that the wages of its workers be raised. This means that the sector and government still need to resolve the question of who bears the associated costs. To this end, we note that the vast majority of Mission Australia's clients experience financial hardship and disadvantage and increasing the costs of early childhood care and education has important equity and social justice implications which we would strongly argue must be taken into account in future discussions that impact directly and indirectly on pricing structures.
- Following on from the above, in our view, the low status of childcare workers can largely be attributed to the low pay, the low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) required to undertake relevant studies, and the questionable quality of training and education that is provided to students.
- However, notwithstanding the above, Mission Australia believes that there are far deeper and more grave obstructions that prevent the elevation of the status of the workforce. In order to address the status crisis the sector is currently facing the sector must restore, reassert and make visible the rich intellectual foundations of the work of early childhood development workers to a broad range of stakeholders, and especially those in circles outside of policy and academia. This might be achieved through a suite of coordinated strategies (including social marketing campaigns, reinvigorated jobs fairs, further promotion of research findings in multi-disciplinary settings and publications, parent education initiatives, and so on).
- Mission Australia underscores the importance of scrutinising the provision of vocational education and training for three reasons:

- 1.) Good quality training can have a significant and direct impact on the skill levels of the early childhood development workforce and is one of the most important solutions to the supply side of the problems captured in the *Issues Paper*.
- 2.) The implementation of the new National Quality Framework provides an attractive business opportunity for Registered Training Organisations, whilst at the same time ECD employers and their workers will be under pressure – in terms of time and resources – to acquire the relevant qualifications. This is likely to be a problematic mix of circumstances. We feel strongly that the content and quality of the supply of training as it currently stands requires reviewing; the need for such a review (and possibly additional quality checks) is arguably more acute given the impending substantial increase in demand for training, and it would seem urgent considering the very future of the sector is at stake and vocational education and training is a central plank in its restoration.
- 3.) Ensuring that training meets the current and future needs and challenges facing the early childhood development workforce is one of the more practical steps that can be taken, and it can be taken relatively swiftly.

## ***Integration of ECD Services***

As outlined in the introduction to this submission, Mission Australia is a lead agency in several locations for integrated programs such as Communities for Children (CfC), Brighter Futures, and Pathways to Prevention, and we run several unique services that include programs for both children and families and/or embed targeted programs within mainstream services. In response to the Productivity Commission's request for examples of integrated and co-located services, we provide two case studies of such services: Miller Community Pre-School and Early Childhood Intervention Service (MCPSECIS), and Macarthur Early Childhood Intervention Services (MECIS).

We also share some of the key lessons we have learned from developing and managing integrated services, and note where these intersect with the research literature. For a discussion of the facilitators and barriers to service integration more generally, we point to the evaluations of Brighter Futures, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, and a recent review of integrated service delivery in early childhood development (Moore and Skinner, 2010).

In brief, our experiences (and the research literature) suggest that the following strategies and factors are key to effective professional development and service delivery for workers in integrated service delivery environments:

- Joint training and team development, including inter-agency training, which can be critical to building relationships between workers and improving collaboration (Muir et al. 2009; Hilferty et al. 2010; Moore & Skinner, 2010).
- Designating time to staff to attend training, and emphasising the importance of this, since some staff may view training as time wasted away from important front-line work (Hilferty et al. 2010).
- Time programmed for staff to undertake coordination or joint working activities, since communication between staff working with the same individuals is critical for seamless service delivery (Moore & Skinner, 2010).
- Recruitment of staff with the right experience – ideally, staff should be conversant in a broad range of early childhood development areas (Moore & Skinner, 2010).

- Flexible pathways for career development to provide more options for individuals and to cultivate a workforce that is broadly-skilled and able to build relationships in a cross-disciplinary environment.
- Communication between generalist early childhood education and care staff and specialist early intervention specialists is important for integrated services to operate effectively. In our experience, specialists can sometimes struggle to share their expertise with others, and may struggle to form collaborative relationships with parents. As others have noted, training in consultation skills would assist specialists to work within integrated service models (see for example, CCCH 2006). In general, we would suggest that this communication occur in a structured way to ensure that all children receive the necessary attention. However, current programming and financial constraints in many services make it extremely difficult to consult as extensively and in depth as would be ideal. At Miller pre-school, for example (see the case study, below), all rostered time outside of pre-school opening hours is taken with planning and set-up. Optimal consultation would mean that meetings would need to occur outside of ordinary rostered hours, which means that staff would need to be paid overtime to attend – a significant struggle given on-going financial constraints. In addition, as noted at the outset of this submission, as a result of the structural factors affecting this workforce, many staff members work part-time. This makes it extremely difficult, logistically, to arrange meetings that work for all parties. As a result of these barriers, communication in integrated settings can tend to happen primarily on an informal basis. While staff members frequently communicate about children, particularly those with complex needs, this sometimes ad-hoc approach can be at the expense of a more systematic approach, which means that occasionally children whose needs are not as readily apparent as others may miss out on important support.
- In integrated services, there can be a need for specialist therapists to also act as generalists. For example, at MECIS (see the case study below), one staff member is designated as the ‘primary contact worker’ for each child, and this person is typically a specialist in their own right (for example, a speech pathologist). Acting in a coordination role or as the key contact worker requires that staff members have a broad knowledge of early childhood development in general, beyond their specialist area; this has clear implications for the training of many specialists, yet we note that currently, allied-health curricula (or occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech pathologists and so on) include a minimal amount of paediatrics. A greater knowledge of early childhood development theory would be useful for those employed in ECD services.
- As has been noted elsewhere, universal early childhood development services provide a de-stigmatised setting which can act as a ‘soft contact’ point for families and children in need of more targeted services. We have found co-location to be particularly important in this respect. At Miller (see the case study below), the family support worker is a well-known ‘face’ at the pre-school. Frequent contact with the staff and families provides opportunities for informal conversations, and this in turn provides a basis for escalation to more formal contact where appropriate.
- Pay parity is a major issue in terms of the ability to recruit early intervention workers in the early childhood development system. Pay for therapists in paediatrics – typically community service based roles – is poor relative to other sectors (such as the sports medicine sector, for example). In particular, employment in the hospital system tends to be far better remunerated than community service roles.
- We also observe that many early intervention or integrated early childhood development services (including our own MECIS and Miller) find it difficult to afford anything other than part-time positions for early intervention workers. In our experience, part-time positions are less appealing than full-time, and hence these tend to be filled by recent graduates, who then move on when they find a full-time position elsewhere, which is typically outside of the early childhood development sector, since services in this space generally experience similar funding constraints. In our view, until permanent, full-time

positions become commonplace in the early childhood development sector, the development of its workforce will remain constrained.

- We also note that some specialist staff working in early intervention space can feel isolated, professionally, since it is common for specialist early intervention workers to be the only professional from their discipline at the service. This limits the career development opportunities available for workers who seek to move to a more senior role within their own discipline since opportunities for promotion may be limited to generalist managerial roles. We also note that this isolation can impact on the professional development for these workers, who must sometimes source professional supervision externally. Time granted for professional supervision also has budgetary implications, particularly given the additional time needed for travel. In practice, service managers may find it difficult to support these activities given the financial constraints under which their services operate; this compounds the already complex problem of attracting high calibre professionals to the early childhood development sector.

#### ***Key points and recommendations***

- The structural issues affecting the early childhood development sector and the fact that the characteristics of this segment of the labour market do not foster and support the type of labour flows and transitions that enhance and strengthen the sector, have especially problematic implications for early intervention and integrated services. This is concerning in view of the universally acknowledged benefits of integrated support and early intervention, and the overarching desire to move further towards integration, and away from a more separatist system. We draw attention, in particular, to the following implications:
- Funding difficulties impact on the professional development opportunities for all workers in the early childhood development space. However, professional development and career opportunities are plentiful and more appealing in other sectors (such as the hospital system) for specialists such as occupational therapists, speech pathologists and so on. For example, often, specialist workers are the sole technical expert in their given field in their workplace and they must source professional supervision elsewhere, for which funding may or may not be able to be provided. This drives specialists away from the early childhood development sector.
- Similarly, the prevalence of part-time opportunities and the lack of permanent full-time positions (again, largely due to funding constraints) means that the early childhood development sector is, generally speaking, an unattractive proposition for candidates. Higher calibre candidates will find more appealing, full-time opportunities elsewhere, leaving the early childhood development sector with candidates who are less competitive in terms of experience and skills.
- Similar to the issues affecting the early childhood development workforce more broadly (and noted earlier), pay parity is a significant barrier to recruiting and retaining specialist staff, as are the limited career pathways for these workers within the early childhood development sector.



### ***Macarthur Early Childhood Intervention Service (MECIS)***

Macarthur Early Childhood Intervention Service (MECIS) provides specialised early childhood intervention services for children from birth to school entry who have a diagnosed developmental delay or disability. The service operates in South West Sydney, an area characterized by pockets of extremely low socio-economic status and poor access to services. The majority of MECIS clients are from low socio-economic backgrounds, and many are from Aboriginal and other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

MECIS' therapy and education services are designed to intervene in a child's first years, to aid development by building on the natural learning occurring in the early years of a child's life. MECIS' services for children include individual centre or home based special education and therapy, group programs, school transition planning and support, and referrals to other agencies and professionals where MECIS is unable to meet a particular need. MECIS is also developing innovative service delivery utilising computer technology, for example an assistive technology program using computers with an adaptive switch system and touch screen monitors.

In addition, MECIS provides support services which aim to assist parents/carers to achieve the best possible outcomes for their child. This includes support groups which run concurrently with the child's group programs, and provision of resources for use at home. MECIS also works with other early childhood development centres, providing consultancy for services and pre-schools which have children with special needs, and running Down Syndrome support groups.

Often children who attend MECIS also attend other services (for example, preschool) or have other professionals working with them. An individual family service plan is developed for each child which brings together all the people involved with the child so everyone can work in a coordinated way to ensure the best outcomes for the child.

MECIS staff are drawn from a range of allied-health disciplines, including Speech Pathology, Special Early Childhood Education, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy. Staff work within an interdisciplinary model, and are experienced in the delivery of specialised paediatric services.

MECIS' coordinated service delivery model requires that the skills and knowledge of staff extend beyond their specific discipline. Staff must be able to communicate effectively with professionals from other disciplines, and use their knowledge of development biology to identify when a referral may be necessary. Staff also require an understanding of the particular difficulties that may be faced by clients from low socio-economic backgrounds; with a high proportion of CALD clients, cultural sensitivity is also required.

### ***Miller Community Pre-School and Early Childhood Intervention Service***

Miller Pre-school & Early Childhood Intervention Service has provided a range of educational programs for young children and their families for over 40 years. Based in Sydney's South-West, Miller supports children and their families who are often isolated because of their low socio-economic status and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Miller's core programs include:

- The Inclusive Preschool – focuses on improving educational outcomes for children, aged 3-6, through the teaching of developmental skills in naturally occurring, play-based settings.
- The Early Childhood Intervention Group – assists young children with developmental delays or disabilities, or those at risk of not reaching milestones without specialised help.

Five early intervention groups operate from the centre:

- Early Play program – provides opportunities for children with additional needs to develop social and play skills. Specialist intervention services such as Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy are incorporated into the programs.
- Interplay program – caters to children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and focuses on developing social, play and communication skills in addition to receiving individual education and play-based therapy. Parents also receive educational workshops and support from a family support worker.
- Learn to play sessions – provides individual educational and therapy sessions for a limited number of children who require intensive assistance in preparation for group participation.
- Supported Early Intervention Pre-school Placements – within the inclusive pre-school program, ten places are allocated each day as supported early intervention placements for children with disabilities. Specialist support from Speech Pathologists and Occupational Therapists are also included into the personal support plan.
- Family support – focuses on supporting families and carers with practical strategies to promote healthy development and family well being. The range of family services includes: parenting programs and workshops, resource library, assistance with transition to school and counselling.

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