

31 January 2010

Early Childhood Development Workforce Study  
Productivity Commission  
LB2 Collins Street East  
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

**RE: Australian Government – Productivity Commission  
Education and Training Workforce: Early Childhood Development  
Commissioned study**

Thank you for providing Northcott Disability Services with the opportunity to provide a submission for the study into the Early Childhood Development workforce.

**ABOUT NORTHCOTT**

Northcott Disability Services was established as The NSW Society for Crippled Children in 1929 by the Rotary Club of Sydney. Northcott's purpose is to build an inclusive society. This is achieved by assisting people with disabilities to develop their skills and achieve their goals - including their potential for independence and ability to participate in their community. Northcott supports over 10,000 people with disabilities and their families across NSW and the ACT. Northcott employs over 500 staff state-wide, providing more than 80 services from more than 30 sites and offices across NSW and the ACT. Northcott provides services to people with a broad range of disabilities including physical, intellectual, sensory, acquired and degenerative disabilities, as well as challenging behaviours.

The majority of Northcott's services and programs funded by Ageing Disability and Home Care (ADHC), NSW Department of Human Services. Northcott also receives state government funding from Community Services, Department of Education & Training (DET) and NSW Health; and receives federal government funding through Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), and Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Northcott also supplements the costs of services through corporate and community fundraising.

Northcott provides a range of early childhood development services including speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, family support, computer assistive technology, early diagnosis support, and playgroups. Northcott also provides a range of other services (such as case management, respite, accommodation) to older children, young people and adults (the workforce of which falls outside this study).

**INTRODUCTION**

Northcott's submission addresses some of the questions raised in the Productivity Commission's *Issues Paper* (Nov. 2010) and provides a response specifically addressing key questions under the following sections from the *Issues Paper*.

**3. The early childhood development workforce***Child health and family support workforces**Workforce for children with additional needs***5. Demand for ECD Workers***Demand for early childhood education and care workers***6. Supply of ECD Workers***Staff retention and turnover**Qualifications and career pathways**ECD workforce for Indigenous children**ECD workforce for children with additional needs*

Through the provision of early childhood development services for young children with a disability, Northcott has attained a large workforce of early childhood development workers. However, Northcott also provides a range of other services to children, young people and adults, and so has a large and diverse workforce. Northcott's submission is primarily based on experiences directly related to our early childhood development workforce; however, some demographic information provided incorporates Northcott's whole workforce.

**3. Early Childhood Development Workforce**

**Question:** *What characteristics describe the child health and family support workforces – in terms of demographics, wages, salaries, working conditions, employment status, staff turnover, unfilled vacancies and job satisfaction?*

**Question:** *What characteristics describe the workforce that provides services to children with additional needs – in terms of demographics, wages, salaries, working conditions, employment status, staff turnover, unfilled vacancies and job satisfaction?*

Northcott has an early childhood development workforce which spans both categories (as outlined in the *Issues Paper*) of child health and family support, and the workforce providing services to children with additional needs. Northcott provides a range of early childhood development services in these areas; however, Northcott also has a variety of services for older children, young people and adults, the workforce of which does not fall into the early childhood development category and scope of this study. As such, Northcott cannot provide distinct demographic information about only our early childhood development workforce. However, below is some general demographic information about Northcott's workforce, which includes early childhood development staff:

- As at end of September 2010, Northcott had 562 staff on payroll. 73 of which are Allied Health professionals.
- Northcott has a pre-dominantly female workforce, where 79% of employees are female.
- Northcott has 56% full-time staff and 44% part-time
- In December 2010, Northcott had a staff turnover rate of 22.89%.
- In the July to September 2010 quarter, Northcott averaged 16 new vacancies posted on Northcott's web site each month.

There are many facets of job satisfaction for Northcott's early childhood workforce, these may include:

- A strong belief in the program and the importance of the service being provided.
- A genuine interest in working with young children and their families.

- A commitment to early childhood development and maximising developmental outcomes for children with additional needs.

## 5. Demand for ECD Workers

**Question:** *What are some of the child development reasons families choose to use, or not use, different Early Childhood Education and Care services? How is this changing over time?*

The child development reasons families choose to use, or not use, different Early Childhood Education and Care services varies widely depending on other demographics. For example, child care may be chosen if both parents work, with whether there are early childhood development benefits to this being a secondary consideration. For others, the cost of child care can be too prohibitive (depending on eligibility for Child Care Benefits / Child Care Rebates and whether these rebates will actually cover enough of the cost for very low income families).

Some families may look for other socialisation opportunities such as playgroups. In our experience, there has been a large uptake in families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, of both mainstream and autism-specific playgroups, but we see less of this trend in children with other disabilities or developmental delays.

For those families where financial issues or work requirements are not linked in with considerations of access to child care, we see either families who want their child to receive as much peer interaction via early childhood education and care services as possible, or families who want to protect their child who they see as too sensitive for interaction with other children in a loud and chaotic setting like a preschool.

## 6. Supply of ECD Workers

**Question:** *Do providers of Early Childhood Development services have difficulties finding staff? If so, are these problems more pronounced in some Early Childhood Development occupations or in some areas of Australia? Why is this the case?*

As a provider of Early Childhood Development services, Northcott does have difficulty finding staff. In particular, we experience significant difficulties in recruiting staff for early childhood allied health therapy positions (including occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physiotherapy). Northcott also experiences difficulties in recruiting family support workforces to provide early childhood development services. As a state-wide provider of disability services, we find it particularly difficult to recruit staff in regional and rural areas.

There are several considerations as to why this is the case:

- The difficulty of attracting staff to work for an NGO when they can receive higher salaries working for comparable government services
- The difficulty attracting allied health therapy staff to work disability field generally, as it is not a well known sector of practice for new graduates.
- There is a shortage of staff of often because there is not a large enough pool of suitably qualified staff (especially the case in regional areas) from which to recruit.

**Question:** *To what extent are Early Childhood Education and Care, child health and family support services experiencing staff retention issues? Are there examples of effective staff retention strategies in the Early Childhood Development sector? How might such strategies be replicated throughout Australia?*

As with any other organisation with an early childhood development workforce, Northcott does experience staff retention issues. It can often be particularly hard to retain staff due to lower wages in the sector and staff often move to higher paid work in comparable government services. Other issues affecting retention of staff include availability of career paths within the organisation, and the stress and high work-load in some early childhood development services. However, with concerted effort over the past few years, Northcott has reduced staff turnover rate from 35% in July 2008 to 22.89% in Dec 2010. Strategies Northcott uses to retain staff include:

- Family friendly work practices which include the provision of a variety of different types of work contracts. These include a variety of permanent part time and temporary positions, and also Personal Leave and use of Time off in lieu.
- Multi skilling is encouraged for employees, even across departments so they have the skills to do each others jobs if necessary. The use of locum positions also encourage up skilling of employees.
- There are many types of work including full time, part time, casual, job sharing, shift work and contracts, with this variety of staff it benefits both individual employees and the organisation.
- Maternity and paternity leave are available to all staff and are tailored to specific individual needs.
- Trainees at Northcott are paid full wages and students undertaking work experience are commonplace throughout the organisation.
- Personal carers leave is available for employees who are in a caring capacity for either a partner, child, sibling or parent.
- Working from home opportunities are available to certain positions within the organisation.
- Hours of Work are currently 304 hrs over 8 weeks (for a full-time position), enabling flexibility in hours worked each week as long as over 8 weeks they average to 38 per week.
- Northcott is very flexible with employees needs and the organisation offers a wide array of contracts of service, which allows for a family friendly workplace and also is accommodating for employees to take leave for religious and cultural holidays and includes TOIL (Time Off In Lieu).
- A new 'flexibility' clause was introduced under the new agreement, to allow for individual variations to the agreement to exist as long as they are mutually agreed and not made under duress.
- Flexible working arrangements may be requested by parents or those with responsibility for a child under school age to enable care for the child also, Parental leave (unpaid) up to 24 months may be requested.
- Northcott regularly offers staff the opportunity to act in 'higher duty' positions, this gives employees the opportunity to gain further leadership skills and management experience.
- Northcott provides a high level of training to its staff and encourages the development of further skills in their chosen field.

**Question:** *Do newly qualified Early Childhood Development workers have the necessary skills and attributes to be effective in the workplace?*

Whether or not newly qualified early childhood development workers have the necessary skills and attributes to be effective in the workplace is influenced by a range of factors. For example, with Northcott's early childhood development family support services, there is a wide range of qualifications that we would accept as suitable for the role (Social Work, Welfare, Psychology, Social Science, Counselling, etc.), and the structures of these courses can be very different. Some qualifications may require 1000 hours of student field education practical experience, where others have no such requirements. Therefore two staff starting in the same role but with



different educational backgrounds, might mean a different level of skills and readiness to undertake the role effectively and without direct supervision.

Another issue for Northcott is the specialised nature of some of our early childhood allied health and family support services. Some of Northcott's early childhood development workforce requires experience not just in working with young children with a disability, but specific experience working with specific types of disability or experience working with specific therapy and intervention methods etc. At times newly qualified staff do not necessarily have this experience and skill level, and so Northcott often aims recruitment for specific roles/services to staff with more experience.

**Question:** *What strategies are being used to attract Early Childhood Development workers from Indigenous communities and to build Indigenous workforce capability? How effective are these strategies?*

Northcott has an early childhood development workforce in Aboriginal specific services, such as our Aboriginal Supported Playgroup. A strategy we use to attract early childhood development workers from Indigenous communities and to build Indigenous workforce capability is the use of the "Full Circle Parent" group assistant position. The Full Circle Parent position is where Northcott employs a parent from the local Aboriginal community to provide the hands on support required for the playgroup. The "Full Circle Parent" group assistant position is a rotational position and so the identified parent is employed on a short term contract initially to ensure suitability. The contract is then renewed for a suitable period of time, before rotating the position within the community. The Full Circle Parent position maximises support systems within the local community, promoting community connectedness, further education, improved parenting skills, early Intervention, empowerment, increased self sufficiency, as well as increased access and opportunities for further employment.

The extensive benefits of the Full Circle Parent position has proven a highly successful concept that has resulted in development of ongoing community leaders and is a key strategy for community building. Northcott's experience is that previous Full Circle Parents employed to date have since either moved onto other formal study, further employment, one worker has moved from the public Housing estate into private rental, not to mention continuing on as positive role models within their local areas who are able to resource, support and refer families/carers to support networks thus maximising ongoing community capacity. The strategy of employing, supporting and resourcing local residents as the group assistant has resulted in more community leaders who have been able to support other community members and parents.

**Question:** *Do Early Childhood Development workers have the skills to provide effective services to all the children who they regularly work with, including those with disabilities and other special needs and from CALD or low SES backgrounds? What additional skills or support might they require in order to do so?*

Early childhood development workers in mainstream settings may not always demonstrate the skills required for working with children with disabilities and how to best support their needs. Northcott believes that all early childhood development staff, particularly those working in early childhood education and care services, would benefit from training to further their skills in this area. These workers also need support and input from the specialist disability early childhood development workforce, and sufficient resources, in order for them to provide the appropriate support for children with a disability who access mainstream education and care services.

**Question:** *How appropriate are the remuneration and conditions for Early Childhood Development workers for children with additional needs?*

Northcott's experience, as an organisation that receives government funding to provide early childhood development services for children with additional needs, is that remuneration in non-government workforce positions is lower than in government provided services. This is because NGOs are often funded at a lower rate than government departments for providing the same service. This means that a Speech Therapist working for Ageing Disability & Home Care (ADHC, Department of Human Services) is paid at a higher rate for providing the same services as a Northcott Speech Therapist.

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Should you require any clarification or further information on this submission please contact Liz Forsyth on (02) 9890 0546 or [liz.forsyth@northcott.com.au](mailto:liz.forsyth@northcott.com.au)

This submission has been prepared by Liz Forsyth (Sector & Business Development Manager) and has been endorsed by Northcott's Chief Executive Officer, Kerry Stubbs.