

Submission
to
Productivity Commission Issues Paper: Early Childhood Development (ECD) Workforce

from

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The following comments are made as response to identified issues to be addressed by this study.

1. *The study aims to consider the skill requirements of ECD sector staff to meet society's needs*

The development of the study's response to this issue needs to ensure that priority is given to children as members of society in their own right. All children have the right to access high quality care and education and the report should not be limited to a focus on issues of workplace engagement for parents. Research shows that a key indicator of quality is the involvement of appropriately qualified educators and carers. In light of this a particular focus of the study needs to be ways to ensure the provision and maintenance of such staff in the prior-to-school sector.

2. *Future demand for ECD staff and Supply of ECD staff*

In giving consideration to "the picture of the number of people in the ECD workforce" particular consideration needs to be given to the challenging issue of high staff turnover and in particular the tendency for many university qualified teachers to move from the prior-to-school sector to the school sector if and when they are able (although it needs to be acknowledged that not all university qualified early childhood teachers make this choice). It can be argued that this trend is due to better pay and conditions for teachers employed in the school sector and it is an issue that needs to be addressed if the prior-to-school sector is to be staffed with high quality teachers. The National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education requires the provision of preschool programs for all children in the year prior to formal schooling, and that these programs are to be delivered by university qualified early childhood teachers.

The following issues require consideration to enable effective delivery of such programs:

- Provision of appropriate university courses with substantive focus on play, development and learning in the early years, relationships with families and the diverse nature of prior to school contexts to provide the qualified staff with specific expertise in the years prior to formal schooling.
- Provision of equitable pay and conditions that will both attract and retain the best of qualified staff rather than those who are unable to acquire positions in the more highly sort after schooling sector. The government needs to provide financial support to enable an adequate supply of university qualified early childhood teachers. However, such qualified teachers will not be encouraged to seek and

maintain employment in the prior-to-school sector without the provision of fair and equitable employment conditions.

- Factors influencing graduating students' decisions about which early childhood sector is their preferred place of employment.
- Provision of funding to the sector to off-set the cost associated with providing equitable pay and conditions for staff. While pay and conditions in the prior to school sector continue to be less attractive (ie lower pay, less leave, less flexibility than teachers with the same qualifications as those in the school sector) these services will struggle to attract and retain the best of appropriately qualified staff.
- Support and PD for service providers to ensure effective teams of diversely qualified staff work to deliver these programs. A multi-layered workforce with a range of qualifications across the staff group, such as that proposed under the National Quality Framework, requires particular capacities and positive attitudes to work effectively. Individuals working in such a team approach require support to facilitate appropriate learning opportunities and to enhance their professional self esteem.
- Continuing commitment to raising community awareness of the significance of play, development and learning in the prior to school years for long term health and well being.
- Acknowledgement by the teacher registration authorities across the country of the particular expertise gained through a birth to eight pre-service teacher education program and recognition of this qualification as eligible for teacher registration in and of its own right.

The ACU early childhood teacher education program requires pre-service teachers to undertake one of the Professional Experience Programs in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) centre working in the Birth to 2 age group. Staff in these settings have much knowledge and practical skills to share with pre-service teachers, however, most staff working in these groups are not university qualified. Although students may be supervised by staff with university teaching qualifications, the day to day interactions with the centre team involve staff and students with varying qualification-pathways working together. This situation raises concerns and challenges for the student-staff mentor relationship. The tension between university qualified and VET qualified staff (Bretherton, 2010) creates complexities in the integration of these groups into effective centre based teams. Further complexities are created as early childhood professionals move from the VET sector to the university sector as part of their career and qualification pathway. These are key elements of consideration in any investigation into the ECD workforce.