

## **Submission to: Productivity Commission: Early Childhood Development Workforce**

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The following reflections and recommendations come from the Edith Cowan University, Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Families Studies) team.

With current changes within the early childhood sector, issues associated with the workforce have gained momentum. The introduction of various concepts to enhance services for children and families, and in particular, the conversations around integrated services, has ignited many discussions and requires serious consideration.

### **Demand for ECD professionals – diversity**

The governments' proposed integrated services model, which has been supported by early childhood education and care practitioners, academics as well as policy makers in a variety of forums and submissions, requires multi-skilled staff. However, the majority of the current early education and care training focus is on knowledge and skills related to child and curriculum development and does not address the integrated services' requirement for a far broader professional expertise. This presents a challenge to educational institutions as they ensure that graduates entering the sector have a range of skills to enable them to work across services that support families and children.

Some of the principles for the successful delivery of integrated services focus on the importance of multidisciplinary teams with expertise in community development and family support. There are a range of options available to equip people with the necessary skills and knowledge to work with children and families. In particular, Edith Cowan University (ECU) offers the Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Family Studies) three year degree. This qualification not only has the objective of providing learning opportunities for those people interested in child care (with a particular focus upon working with children 0 – 3 years) but provides opportunities for graduates to work in a range of other services that support families with children. This qualification seeks to broaden students' understanding of the needs of children and families, their communities and society as well as prepares them for work as policy makers, managers and practitioners within the community/public service sector.

An alternative area of study is teachers training. For example, ECU offers the four year Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Studies. This qualification provides graduates with education that enables them to work in education and care settings. This ECU qualification is one of many that provides learning and development of skills for teachers involved with young children. This and other similar qualifications, add a further dimension to the diversity of skills and backgrounds that are important to working with families within a multidisciplinary approach.

However, in Western Australia there is a shortage of Early Childhood teachers who have appropriate qualifications to work with infants and toddlers. This, along with the range of skills related to family support, community work as well as leadership and management, which are not always adequately addressed by teachers' training, presents additional challenges for early childhood and a integrated service model. This is a serious issue, which needs addressing as a multiskilled, multidisciplinary workforce within the early childhood sector is required to effectively and efficiently support families and young children and to meet the governments' agenda around the early years.

### **Career pathways for ECD professionals**

Career pathways are important in maintaining the quality of professionals and the early childhood sector. Once again there are a range of options that can be embarked upon.

For those people wishing to up-skill themselves to a university qualification, there are a number of options. The Bachelor of Social Science at ECU provides one of these within the Children and Family Studies area. TAFE Diploma students who wish to continue their studies can receive an advanced standing for eight units when they enrol in this course. The development of knowledge that students have previously acquired is acknowledged, and this provides good grounding to expand their knowledge and skills to work with young children and their families in various settings.

For Bachelor of Social Science graduates, there is an option of completing a one year Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Studies, which gives them formal teaching qualifications. This pathway provides the early childhood workforce with a range of options and professionals to meet the needs of people working, or aiming to work, in various early childhood and family services settings.

In addition, combining undergraduate qualifications such as teaching qualifications with Master Degrees in, for example, leadership or community development would be beneficial to the early childhood workforce. Such a combination of skills and knowledge would assist with meeting the workforce requirements within this sector. However, attracting and retaining graduates at the Master level in the early childhood sector could be problematic, and this

requires attention if the sustainability and the retention of qualified and experienced workers are to be addressed.

### **Challenges to up-skilling of ECD workforce**

A number of issues need to be considered when providing opportunities for up-skilling within the early childhood sector. Whilst this is an important part of the Federal Government early childhood agenda, this sector's working conditions and remuneration need to be improved.

It has been revealed that whilst the ECU Bachelor of Social Science qualification enables graduates to work in early childhood education and care, the number of graduates entering or remaining in the child care sector is low. Workforce issues deter graduates from remaining in child care as they seek better paid positions, more attractive conditions and better career development opportunities. Yet retaining professionals with specialised knowledge to work effectively with young children and their families is one step to ensuring that the developmental needs of children are met, families are supported in their important task of raising children. This is of prime importance as, according to international research (Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2005; McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) early support for children and families results in economic and social benefits for whole of societies.

The following points are raised and require consideration in the development of the Early Childhood workforce.

1. It is important to reconsider the content of teachers' training especially in relation to skills in family support, community work and leadership and management. This could be addressed by the completion of graduate certificates consisting of relevant units. There are a number of educational institutions that have the potential to address this. For example, such units are currently offered by Edith Cowan University Bachelor of Social Science Degree and could be relatively easily re-packaged into a Graduate Certificate if needed. This would create an option for graduates who are not able or not willing to undertake post graduate studies at Master level.
2. It is also important to address the shortage of Early Childhood teachers with expertise in infant and toddler care. Although this issue applies to many states and territories, it is especially evident in Western Australia, due to a historical divide between early education and care. Once again there are various educational institutions that have a role to play here. For example, the Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Family Studies) degree has a potential to partially address this issue. However, it is uncertain whether this program will be considered as an alternative to teachers' training in WA.

Moreover, it is also unclear whether the current A\* rating for child care educators in Western Australia will be retained. The retention of this would ensure that staff working with children between 0-3 years of age have the appropriate skills and knowledge to deliver quality programs for infants and toddlers, and is comparable to the skills and knowledge staff delivering programs for children from 3-8 year have.

Another way to address the shortage of staff, with expertise in infants and toddler education and care, is to create short courses at the graduate level which could complement tertiary training not covering these knowledge and skills. Similarly to our suggestion in point 1, a Graduate Certificate in Infants and Toddlers Care could be created and offered, internally and externally, by Edith Cowan University.

Whilst ECU currently has one of the few University qualifications within Australia that focuses upon infants and toddlers and provides graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to work with families and communities, other educational institutes also focus upon these areas. An approach that is collaborative and that is focused upon ensuring the development of a skilled and professional workforce to support families and children at such a critical time in their lives is paramount. This is pivotal to ensuring that children and their families have the best chance to achieve their optimal outcomes and consequently positive long term outcomes for communities.

## References

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