

Early Childhood Development Workforce

This submission to the Early Childhood Development Workforce Productivity Commission Issues Paper is made on behalf of GoodStart Childcare and specifically seeks to address the issues raised with regard to early childhood education and care.

GoodStart Childcare currently operates 661 childcare centres nationally and employs approximately 12,000 childcare workers including Directors, Bachelor qualified teachers, qualified contact workers and unqualified contact workers.

GoodStart (formerly ABC Developmental Learning) childcare services provide childcare for all children including those with additional needs.

GoodStart's response to this Issues Paper provides input into the key areas of demand and supply of Early Childhood Development Workers and raises additional questions and comments for consideration.

1. Demand and Supply for Early Childhood Education and Care Workers

GoodStart Childcare recognises higher staffing levels will increase the Early Childhood Development Workers' ability to respond to individual children's needs. Similarly it is deemed the minimum qualification noted in the NQS will go some way to increasing the quality of knowledge available to support quality care and education in the early childhood services. Both increased staffing levels and qualification requirements are received positively with regard to the impacts of increased quality on the childcare sector.

However, these changes pose significant challenges for the sector in terms of the provision of Early Childhood workers. Typically these challenges are predominantly recognised in the attraction and retention of childcare workers across all qualification levels.

1. 1 Wages & Conditions

Current wages and conditions are significantly inferior to those of colleagues within the schooling system. In addition to pay disparity, the imbalance in conditions such as hours of work, leave provisions, paid programming and professional development time and opportunities, and perceived "status and professionalism" of the childcare sector, pose barriers in both the attraction and retention of early childhood workers.

Many Early Childhood Development workers have indicated that current pay rates and conditions are insufficient to commit to the continuous improvement required by the new standards, and will choose to leave the sector.

1.1.1 Options for funding the increased wages and salaries of more highly qualified Early Childhood Development workers currently available

- Government funding is predominantly geared to families through Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate to assist participation in the Early Childhood sector.
- Victoria and Queensland kindergarten programs have been successful in negotiating increased pay conditions for Early Childhood Teachers. Long Daycare Centres (LDC) would benefit from similar programs in all states and territories.

- State and Federal Government provide subsidies for qualified Early Childhood Development workers to work in rural and remote centres.
- The cost for services to comply with the higher qualification requirements under the NQS will to some extent flow on to families through increases to fees

1. 2 Qualifications

Under the current qualification regulations (particularly regarding bachelor qualified teachers) difficulty is experienced maintaining staffing levels both from an attraction and retention perspective. This is particularly evident in NSW and regional and remote services nationally.

NSW Department of Community Services recognises that the currently regulated Early Childhood Teachers ratio requirement in NSW is not able to be consistently met by children's services. Numerous services apply for Early Childhood Teacher exemptions to permit Diploma qualified educators studying approved Early Childhood teaching degrees to work in the role of an Early Childhood Teacher. The lack of take up by Early Childhood Teachers and dropout rate by Diploma qualified educators studying Early Childhood teaching degrees does not support current Early Childhood Teacher ratio requirements.

The issue is two fold

- There is decreased enrolment in bachelor of education courses across the board
- Attraction of bachelor qualified staff into the childcare sector opposed to the schooling/education system

In addition, increasing qualification requirements across the childcare sector (ie Certificate III, Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Childcare) will provide challenge. New temporary waivers provided in the proposed Regulations permit only 12 month exemptions for unqualified Early Childhood Development workers to fill qualified Early Childhood Development positions in line with the new requirements of qualified Early Childhood Development staffing arrangements proposed in the Regulations and associated National Quality Standards, with the possibility of only a further 12 month extension.

Challenges faced include:

- perception that, effort to upgrade qualification and opportunity for greater role responsibility, is not adequately compensated
- certain demographics of childcare workers will not undertake additional study and as such be forced to leave the industry

1.2.1 Qualifications and Career Pathways

How appropriate are the qualifications required for entry into various Early Childhood Development occupations?

- Undergraduate qualifications should include a focus on a strong understanding of early childhood pedagogy, learning and development to ensure the "intricately interwoven and interrelated physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning"¹ are valued and supported by all Early Childhood Development workers.

¹ DEEWR – Belonging, Being & Becoming, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia 2009, p9

To provide high quality care and education a service must ensure educators are adequately skilled to meet the diverse needs of families, support parenting skills of families and provide for the individual learning, development and care needs of each child who attends an early childhood service.

Educators should have a strong and informed foundation to develop skills necessary to support quality education and care for children in their early years. The need for higher skill levels at both the necessary entry requirement and ongoing skill set for early childhood educators is becoming more apparent as Early Childhood centres begin to provide more comprehensive services to meet the diverse needs of children and families in their communities. To support the diverse and specialised needs of children and their families and the ongoing capability of Early Childhood Development workers to meet these needs, the Early Childhood Development skill set should be broad with options to specialise.

The diversity of Early Childhood settings should also be recognised through flexible qualification components. The common focus in Early Childhood settings is the provision of quality education and the wellbeing of children who attend the service. However each setting has particular differences which require varying skill sets for Early Childhood Development workers within these settings. Consideration needs to be given to qualification components that support the diversity of settings and permit Early Childhood Development workers to attain skills in specific areas to meet identified needs.

A balanced approach must be applied to the increase in qualification requirement. Recognition of experience within the sector needs to be balanced with the specific qualification required. (e.g. a Diploma qualified staff member who has recognised years of experience and has completed specific professional learning modules may be considered to have equivalent Early Childhood Teacher degree status. Clear and refined criteria is essential for this to be implemented).

- More consideration needs to be given to flexibility within skills and qualifications to meet the growing diversity of services being developed and offered within the community.

Do differences in qualification requirements restrict workers' ability to move between jurisdictions or Early Childhood Development sectors?

This has been an issue under the current jurisdictional based legislation requirements for Early Childhood qualifications and standards. Further consideration needs to be given to the differences in core course content and electives available to ensure all Early Childhood Development workers have competency in all necessary areas of their work.

For example: Early childhood teachers who have the qualifications to meet regulated/funded requirements and are able to work competently in all shifts in Long Day Care (LDC) in some States/Territories may not be able to open or close a children's service in another State as they do not have the necessary training to support work with children under the age of 2 years.

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

- Minimum qualifications noted in the NQS go some way to increasing the quality of knowledge available to support quality care and education in early childhood services. However further review of course content for minimum qualifications, both the Certificate III and the Diploma needs to be completed to ensure educators are well equipped to meet the knowledge

requirements of all areas of Early Childhood development and pedagogy. To ensure educators provide quality care and education programs for children, they must have access to and complete training in all areas to support quality. This can be provided through core course content for the identified minimum qualifications or through professional learning programs supported by business and government agencies.

- Current qualifications in Certificate III and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care can be improved with the introduction of early childhood pedagogy and content more closely aligned with the National Quality Standard.
 - “*Belonging, Being & Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*”(EYLF) requires all educators who work with children to have an understanding of early childhood pedagogy;
 - The draft “*My Time, Our Place – Framework for School Age Care in Australia*” (FSAC) requires all educators who work with children of school age being cared for out of school time to have an understanding of middle childhood pedagogy.
 - Other areas in which early childhood educators and school age care educators need strong understanding and competency:
 - Leadership skills for pedagogical/educational leaders required under the EYLF and NQS;
 - Research skills for all educators who work with children to support informed debate about theories and practices to meet requirements of EYLF, FSAC and NQS
 - Cultural needs of families and children within the community
 - Child health, safety and wellbeing to meet requirements of NQS
 - Child protection to meet requirements of State/Territory legislation.

In addition to course content/theory, consideration must be given to the ongoing training and upskilling of childcare workers once they have commenced in their role. This will ensure maintenance of knowledge and skill against current trends and ongoing “best practise”

1.3 Regulatory Burden

GoodStart has experienced the loss of qualified early childhood teachers to the school sector offering better awards and conditions with less regulatory requirement than the Early Childhood Development sector.

In terms of “regulatory burden” resulting from recently announced reforms, we anticipate the following

- While recognising the removal of some duplication of state and federal regulation through the development of the National Quality Framework, the changes are not anticipated to have any measurable reduction in the regulatory requirements on Early Childhood Development workers in services.
- Providers will benefit under the new national legislation, as there will be one approval process for Providers (Licensees) regardless of the number of services they operate and one approval process for each service the Provider operates. Both approvals are ongoing until cancelled, suspended or surrendered. This will reduce the regulatory burden to Providers.

- Changes to the Early Childhood Development staffing arrangements under the new national regulatory framework will mean more qualified Early Childhood Development workers are necessary to comply with existing and new ratios. Currently not all states/territories require minimum Certificate III qualifications or a qualified Early Childhood Teacher ratio (with the exception of NSW which currently has a required Early Childhood Teacher ratio). The minimum qualification requirements will commence 1 January 2014. This will increase the regulatory burden for services that need to apply for temporary staffing waivers to comply with new qualification requirements. The maximum approval period of 12 months may further increase the regulatory burden at the end of each approved 12 months period particularly for services in remote, rural and hard to reach areas that may have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff to meet new qualified staff ratios.
- Under the new regulatory system, the requirement for Early Childhood Teachers will become national, exponentially increasing the difficulty for services in meeting the new Early Childhood Teacher ratio requirement by 2014.
- The completion and continual review by services who participate in the National Quality Assessment and Rating process of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) will add to the current regulatory burden of services. The QIP is completed by the service in partnership with management, educators, staff, families and interested others². The service must update the QIP regularly (minimum recommendation is annually) and submit prior to review under the Assessment and Rating process. The plan must remain current and available to sight during State/Territory Regulatory visits. Therefore additional ongoing time must be allocated to the upkeep of the QIP to ensure currency with quality improvement guidelines.

1.3.1 Options for reducing the regulatory burden

Commentary and research suggest there is a way to deliver quality and reduce regulatory requirement for services. Tanya Bretherton in the NCVER paper on Developing the childcare workforce: Understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers quotes Osgood 2004 that "Some researchers have asserted that regulation prevents the exercise of professional judgement and poses a direct challenge to 'professionalism' within the sector."³ Bretherton offers that "In Denmark for example, which is ranked by the OECD to be one of the highest quality child care environments worldwide, child care centres are required to complete very little documentation and paperwork at the workplace level."

1.4. Professional Status

Centre Directors and educators have noted the stigma still associated with "childcare" and its perceived purpose as providing opportunity for supervised play whilst the Preschool setting is perceived as providing education in the year or two before formal schooling. These perceptions are not only held by parents of children in the early years, teachers and managers within preschool and primary education settings but are also held and encouraged by workers in child support settings, universities and to some degree government settings.

² Draft Self Assessment and Quality Improvement Planning Process Phase Two.

³ Bretherton, 2010 "Developing the child care workforce: Understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers", Workplace Research Centre, University of Sydney, Pg 37

More work needs to be done by providers, teachers, universities, businesses and government to support the idea that the Long Day Care settings continue to provide quality educational programs delivered by qualified and experienced practitioners in the years before formal schooling. Educators in LDC settings need to advocate for professional status equal to those workers in preschool and Kinder settings.

The factors that determine professional status in the sector include:

- Historical perceptions of settings where childcare supports workforce participation and preschool is for preparation for school.
- Quality of the service and engagement/exposure with the community.
- Linkages with Universities and social agencies and recognition of services contribution to early childhood development.

A change in status may be achieved by Government and the sector collaborating on improving the awareness of quality education outcomes available in all early childhood settings.

If a change in status was achieved the effects would include

- More families accessing LDC for education outcomes for children in their years before school.
- Greater recognition of education in LDC and more potential for LDC to secure Early Childhood Teachers.
- Improved status of Early Childhood Development workers within the community.
- Community understanding and acknowledgement of the importance of quality care and education in the early years before formal schooling.
- Increased access to professional development opportunities for Early Childhood Development workers especially in the LDC, OSHC and FDC settings.
- Improved understanding of early childhood pedagogy and its potential for improving children's access to quality educational programs that support ongoing learning.

1.5 COAG Reforms

Will the supply of Early Childhood Development workers expand sufficiently to meet COAG's objectives?

- Anticipated that there will be a shortfall of LDC Early Childhood Teachers due to increased Early Childhood Teacher ratio requirements in all states/territories and the current perception of Early Childhood Development workers in LDC settings.
- The "working towards" provision will assist current Early Childhood Development workers up-skilling to Certificate III or Diploma qualifications, as will the removal of course tuition costs for these qualifications support participation.

Are training providers and courses of sufficient quality to meet the needs of the Early Childhood Development sector?

- Current qualifications in Certificate III and Diploma levels can be improved with the introduction of early childhood pedagogy and content more closely aligned with the National Quality Standard.

1.6 Additional Resourcing Requirements

1.6.1 Additional needs

A further consideration on staff resourcing needs of LDC is the provision of care for additional needs children. Current funding for additional needs workers does not adequately cover the “above” ratio staffing numbers, nor the skill set required for childcare workers providing education and care for children with additional or specialised needs. Further consideration needs to be given to the education of Early Childhood Development workers in the area of additional needs beyond providing “an additional pair of hands”. Similarly funding needs to be reviewed to ensure children’s additional need requirements are adequately and appropriately met.

1.6.2 Multi cultural consideration

This paper raises the question of how best to provide skills to Early Childhood Development workers in providing effective services to Indigenous children. Similarly providing skills to Early Childhood Development workers across cultures needs to be considered. In geographic locations with predominant ethnic groups, both skill sets of Early Childhood Development workers to adequately understand and represent children from diverse cultures, plus attract staff from same ethnic groups, is important for the provision of effective and culturally sensitive education and care services.

2. Additional questions/comments raised by GoodStart in relation to Commission topic

2.1 Regulatory Burden

2.1.1 Do transitional arrangements towards the new regulation present a significant burden to Early Childhood Development workers?

- The sector is apprehensive as to whether there is sufficient time for existing Early Childhood Development workers to understand and apply the requirements of the National Quality Framework while working full time in Early Childhood Development settings.
- Draft documentation to support the National Quality Framework in early childhood will not be finalised until mid 2011. This leaves only 6 months before implementation on 1 January 2012 of the National Law and associated Regulations, Standards and assessment rating system to train the sector, including State/Territory regulators and assessors, service providers, coordinators, nominated and certified supervisors, early childhood educators and other early childhood Early Childhood Development workers before assessment under the new NQS assessment and rating process commences.
- The proposed draft Regulations associated with the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 are likely to be made available to the public for consultation and feedback by mid March 2011 with public submissions for consideration due by 14 April 2011. The proposed Regulations will commence 1 January 2012 with limited time for services to understand, reflect on and implement changes as required by the new regulation.

2.1.2 Does the subjective nature of the recently announced reforms and associated approval, assessment and rating system present a burden for Early Childhood Development workers?

- As the process is new to Early Childhood Development workers there is currently limited understanding of requirements. A significant number of draft elements of the National Quality Standard within each of the Quality Areas for assessment and rating are subjective and open to interpretation. This can afford services the opportunity to provide evidence or discuss practices that will provide the assessor with sufficient information to award the service a higher rating or equally it may leave the requirement to meet each standard open to personal interpretation by the assessor who may choose to disregard and alternate approach and award a lower rating. There will be added burden for Early Childhood Development workers in ensuring their practices meet the interpretation agreed to by all parties or ensuring educators are adequately trained to confidently defend practices that they feel meet their own interpretation of the element or standard in question.

2.2 Qualifications required for entry into various Early Childhood Development occupations

2.2.1 Does Early Childhood course content need to include more specialised areas of learning to support the requirements of the reforms?

- To achieve the rating of National Quality Standard or higher under the new assessment and rating process of the National Quality Standards all educators who work with children must have comprehensive understanding of all current early childhood issues and practices. These area include but are not limited to:
- Understanding of issues and support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Understanding of issues facing children and families in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Understanding of issues facing children of immigrant families
- Inclusive support for children with additional/specialised needs
- Leadership within the community.

2.2.2 Should there be more correlation between Early Childhood course content and the NQS and the Regulations?

Currently, providers and nominated supervisors must ensure all educators at the service have knowledge and understanding of the content of following documents which are due to commence January 2012:

- New Education and Care Services National Law 2010;
- Associated National Quality Standards;
- Associated assessment and rating process;
- Self assessment and Quality Improvement planning process;
- The Early Years Learning Framework or other approved early years framework;

- Individual State and Territory legislation e.g. child protection and food safety
- Educators will also need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the new Regulations (currently being drafted) that will inform the National Quality Standards by January 1 2012.

The above documents inform expected practice in early childhood services. However educators achieve limited understanding of these documents and their content through completion of current Early Childhood qualifications. More consideration needs to be given to the content of undergraduate courses to support educators working in the field of early childhood in developing a comprehensive understanding of the legislation and guiding practices that should inform their everyday practice.

2.2.3 What more can be done to develop the LDC workforce to meet the requirements of the NQS?

LDC Educators should be provided with access to quality professional learning opportunities that meet both their needs and the needs of the community in which they work , opportunities that align with the requirements of the NQS and that are not cost prohibitive to the Early Childhood Development worker.

In meeting these needs of the Early Childhood Development worker consideration needs to be given to:

- Location of professional programs and approved courses
- Appropriate course content to meet the requirements of new standards including the EYLF, the FSAC, the national Law and Regulations
- Cost to practitioner and provider
- Release time for Early Childhood Development practitioner
- Availability of appropriately qualified relief staff to meet the release times of Early Childhood Development practitioner

2.3 Developing Professional Status for Early Childhood sector

2.3.1 What is the role of government in developing the status of the Early Childhood sector?

- Recognition of the difference between the types of early childhood settings and different skills required of educators working in these settings (LDC; PS; FDC)
- Provision of adequate and necessary professional learning opportunities for educators to meet the new requirements of the national legislation and associated NQS and assessment and rating systems.
- Community awareness campaigns to promote the value of individual types of Early Childhood settings available in the community and in particular the value of LDC in providing children with (not currently acknowledged) quality care but also in providing quality Early Childhood education programs for children.
- Promotion of the value of working in the Early Childhood Development sector within the education field in all areas of the community

- Universities
- Families
- Business

Promotion of early childhood development including neurological development and the importance of early education from birth to school age in supporting appropriate development of children in the years before school. Government needs to advocate for the importance of providing appropriate education and care programs for children in the early years to support children's learning throughout the school years into adulthood to ensure that in line with COAG's National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care "all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation" ⁴

2.4 COAG

2.4.1 Has sufficient consideration been given to the upskilling of the existing workforce and new entrants to the Early Childhood Development workforce?

- Replacement Early Childhood Development Workers for current workers taking non contact time for study or training.
- Casual Early Childhood Development Workers.
- Resourcing.

2.4.2 Has there been consideration given to the Early Childhood Development workforce growth necessary in each setting (LDC/FDC/OSHC/PS) to meet the requirements of the recently announced reforms?

⁴ Council of Australian Government (COAG) – Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy 2009. P4