

**NIFTeY NSW**

**submission to**

**Productivity Commission**  
**Early Childhood Workforce Draft**

NIFTeY (National Investment for the Early Years) acknowledges the foresight encapsulated in the Productivity Commission's seeking advice on *factors affecting the current and future demand and supply for the ECD workforce*, and placing as its first area *the delivery of fully integrated ECD services including maternal and child health, childcare, preschool, family support services and services for those with additional needs*.

NIFTeY is a leading national advocacy organisation promoting policies and practices that will deliver the best outcomes for young Australians during their first three years of life.

NIFTeY has brought the evidence about the foundational importance of the early years to the attention of all levels of government and to a variety of professional disciplines including the welfare, health and education sectors. There is an impressive and growing research base to show that the very earliest years of a child's life (from conception to year 3 in particular) lay the foundations for life-long physical and mental health, emotional well-being, social integration and intellectual development. NIFTeY holds a national conference every two years that provides a vehicle for dissemination of current research and best practice and forums with Government. In 2006 NIFTeY sponsored the Nobel Laureate James Heckman to meet with leaders in Australia on early childhood development policy and practice. His world famous research identifies that the earlier we intervene to provide both security and stimulation in a child's life, the greater the returns both in dollars invested, and in personal growth; and that cognitive/intellectual development does not occur in isolation from social/emotional development.

NIFTeY advocates for the development of early childhood policy that includes a focus on:

- the whole child, not separating health, welfare, education, care
- supporting parenting from the pre-natal period
- educating the community about the importance of the 0-3 period

Future service models need to include whole-of-population support that incorporates **universal, secondary and tertiary services**. The scope and nature of universal services needs to increase with a clear focus on supporting parenting.

The advent of Paid Parental Leave (limited though it is at this time to only 18 weeks, when at least 12 months is needed *by the babies*) is a great step forward for Australia. What is now needed, and the Terms of Reference indicate that this is understood, is a **universal system of support for parents in raising their children, including the quality of experience for children who spend time in early childhood education and care.**

NIFTeY NSW has produced a discussion paper entitled *Early Learning and Family Centres* to explore universally-provided integrated ECD services, with secondary and tertiary services easily accessible from within the universal platform. The paper is attached.

### **What types of work will be needed**

Skillful pre-natal workers (midwives, doulas) who through developing a respectful relationship with the pregnant woman can develop trust that can be built on to assist with nutrition, limiting the use of harmful substances, establishing social networks and supports, and preparing for connecting with more relationships and services post-natally.

A skillful workforce for an extensive nurse home-visiting program that is strongly preventive (such as David Olds' work, including the new program with Australian indigenous communities), and linking this program with Early Learning and Family Centres.

Workers in early childhood development who relate to and support parenting in terms of the child's health, nutrition, emotional, social and cognitive development. We need a variety of skills in such a workforce – health, early childhood education, social supports, mental health, speech pathology and more.

We need tertiary-qualified early childhood education and care graduates who can work in integrated services settings for all ages of preschool children, and can work with parents.

We need to develop leaders and managers who can work with cross-discipline teams and with the community to develop integrated services.

We need an explosion of early child development workforce to meet the developing vision of fully integrated ECD services. There are several major issues that need addressing if we are looking to a future where it is widely understood and accepted that the early years need, not marginal support, but should be our major investment in terms of priority.

### **1) Issues impacting on supply and retention of qualified staff.**

- University-qualified early childhood teachers form the core workforce of a strong universal early childhood service system. They are the touch point for the majority of young families utilising education and care services from when their children are a few months old and their role enables them to develop sustained trusting relationships with families.

Priority needs to be given to the supply and retention of qualified staff and in particular to specialist University-qualified early childhood teachers. This is essential to meet the current staffing needs of existing services as well as Government plans to provide quality early childhood programs for all of Australia's children in their year before school.

- The shortage of qualified staff will continue unless attention and change occurs in the areas of remuneration and conditions. In the case of early childhood teachers there needs to be parity with teachers working in schools.
- Child Care staff should be paid so they can afford to use a children's service for their own child. This is not the case for many staff due to low wages.
- Incentives need to be made available to attract and keep qualified staff in areas where it is difficult to attract applicants eg in rural remote areas. These need to be funded by Governments as local communities cannot support additional costs. It is also important for the quality of services to children so that those in low income or isolated areas do not end up with poorer quality programs due to the lack of, or turnover of, qualified staff
- There are limited opportunities for career paths in the field. This is due in part to the fragmented nature of early childhood services where many services are not part of large systems but are stand alone such as preschools in NSW and owner operated long day care centres. This places limits on the career paths available and thus people leave to seek employment elsewhere where career progression is possible.
- When improving remuneration of staff it is essential that this does not result in services becoming unaffordable for families. This is already an issue for many families eg preschool costs in NSW. Government payments or subsidies need to be reviewed and increased to ensure universal access is a reality. This would require increases in State/Territory subsidies in some cases eg NSW as well as the Commonwealth Child Care Benefit.
- The problem of attracting and keeping qualified staff is discussed constantly in key peak forums but much of the evidence is anecdotal. NIFTeY recommends that a study be undertaken to look at job satisfaction and turnover so there is an informed research basis for decisions.
- Industrial awards or the modern award needs to include recognition of additional qualifications such as those who obtain qualifications in working with children with additional needs.
- Government at a Federal level has a policy commitment to an Education Revolution with the goal that Australia should have many more people with higher levels of educational attainment than is currently the case. If this is to be realised then urgent attention needs to be given to ensuring early childhood education services for children prior to school age are accessible and of high quality. Currently many families cannot afford to send their children to a service due to the cost. This in turn keeps a downwards pressure on the wages and conditions of staff which in turn impacts on quality. More funding is required to

make services affordable and to ensure that staff are attracted to and see early childhood education and care as an exciting career which will only happen if wages and conditions are improved.

## **2) Increasing Complexity and Change in Education and Care Services.**

NIFTEY welcomes the proposed introduction of National Standards within the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the proposed bringing together of Regulations, Quality Improvement and Accreditation.

The introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) has been welcomed as a significant step forward which can assist in improving quality for children, accountability of the profession and enhance understanding in the community that early childhood is both care and education and involves professionally qualified staff planning for learning through play.

- The role of early childhood staff has expanded and increased in complexity over the years, requiring more time for staff in non face-to-face activities.
  - Many children used to attend a service 5 days a week, but these days children often attend 2, 3 or 4 days a week. This has placed increasing demands on staff in many ways including the need to maintain developmental records and to plan for increasing numbers of children.
  - The number of children with additional needs has also increased and although there is some funding to assist with inclusion it is not sufficient to cover the full costs. This makes planning more complex for staff and requires child free time to collaborate with other professionals working with the child and their family.
  - More recently there has been a growth in integrated services employing multidisciplinary teams. Early childhood staff need to form relationships and work with a range of individuals and organisations in collaborative ways and be able to bring their particular expertise to the delivery of programs. It is also important to have early childhood educators who can take on leadership roles in these teams. (see Cheeseman S.(in press) for more details)
- The levels of responsibility of staff and in particular the directors of services have increased in complexity. Wages and conditions have not increased commensurate with these demands.
- The role of the educator is poorly understood despite increasing attention to brain research and the critical importance of learning from birth. This requires the use of many different strategies to ensure a broader community understanding of teaching and learning in the early years. Apart from improving remuneration etc there need to be community education programs explaining the importance of learning

through relationships and play in the early years, the critical importance of the family and the role of children's services in this development.

- The language associated with services needs to change. It does not help community understanding when we have labels such as preschool as education with "school" in the label whilst other services are referred to as care eg long day care. In fact these services provide both education and care. The educational program involves intentional teaching. (See definition in the EYLF). It is also confusing to many when the EYLF and the proposed NQF refer to all those working with children as educators and make no clear distinction between what is the work of qualified teachers and for example a staff member with a Certificate 3.
- The changes to a national approach to National Standards that include staffing requirements, including qualifications and adult/child ratios, as a requirement for the National Quality Framework is welcome. We note that in NSW, there is a need to be sure that the current requirements for university-qualified teachers is maintained at all times and improved over time. There should be no reduction in staffing standards in any jurisdiction as a result of the introduction of the NQF.
- Significant changes need to be supported by well resourced professional development and resources. This has not happened with the introduction of the EYLF and it appears that there will be limited support for the introduction of the NQF. Such lack of support results in staff leaving the sector. This would never happen when major changes are made to curriculum in schools and should not happen in early childhood. When the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System was first introduced for long day care in Australia the support including information sessions, seminars, workshops and a variety of other resources including videos, and written material was quite extensive and so created a positive feeling for the change. This time the lack of consultation in the change process and the limited support for the introduction of the EYLF are disappointing.

### **3) Courses and Professional Development**

- Registration of teachers could assist in gaining better recognition and status as a profession as exists in other professional occupations. This should include requirements to maintain currency of knowledge and a commitment to ongoing professional development. There are different views as to whether this should be part of a national system for all teachers so as to improve the status of the profession or whether a separate registration institute and body could better reflect the requirements to work with very young children and their families and for the specific leadership roles in these settings. If separate it would be essential it was not seen as a lower level but different to that required of teachers in schools.
- Preparation of teachers should remain in universities where there is a requirement for academics to be engaged in research. This informs course content at a higher level than just through translation of

research. The significant change in moving courses from Colleges of Advanced Education to Universities has been the production of Australian research where in the past the field and policy makers relied almost totally on the United States and England to inform current practice through research findings.

- It is important to get a national system of approval of qualifications in place so there is some consistency about fundamental requirements across Australia. This should include a review of what is required in the preparation of teachers so that they are able to meet the basic requirements of positions in the workplace upon graduation. There has been criticism of many courses provided by Universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in terms of the content and the practicum experiences provided. This has included concerns that now for example in NSW the Institute of Teachers requirements are undermining the content of courses in preparing graduates to work in prior to school settings. Concerns have also been raised about the quality of different courses offered by RTOs and the lack of checks on course delivery in the vocational education area
- Pathways for upgrading qualifications need to be affordable, but this is currently not the case. Consideration should be given to a waiving of HECS fees.
- There need to be more resources provided to support professional development. Services often cannot enable staff to attend courses because of the difficulties in finding replacement staff and because of the cost which has to be recovered through fees for families. Funds to support buy out time and costs of travel need to be available. This should be a particular priority to support training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals