

Victorian Government Submission

Productivity Commission Early Childhood Development Workforce Study

2011

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1 Introduction

The Victorian Government is working to ensure that all families have access to high quality early childhood services. It is recognised that a high quality early childhood development (ECD) workforce is a critical element in service quality.

The Victorian Government undertakes a number of functions relating to early childhood development services in Victoria, primarily through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). DEECD:

- regulates and licences education and care services including kindergartens, long day care centres, family day care, outside school hours care and occasional care.
- contributes funding to a range of ECD services including the universal maternal and child health (MCH) service (jointly funded with local government), kindergarten, early childhood intervention (ECI) services and some parenting and family support services.
- develops state-wide frameworks for ECD services including the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework.
- delivers a limited number of services, primarily early childhood intervention services.

With a limited role in the delivery of early childhood services, the Victorian Government works in partnership with a range of early childhood stakeholders, including local government, community service organisations (CSOs), community-based education and care services and private businesses. These partners play an important role in the delivery of early childhood services and as employers of the early childhood workforce. Other stakeholders, including the Commonwealth Government, peak associations, universities and training organisations are partners in ensuring the early childhood workforce is well placed to deliver high quality services to meet the demands of reform.

The Productivity Commission study on the Early Childhood Development Workforce comes at a time of significant state and national reform in early childhood, much of which has implications for the early childhood workforce. The Victorian *Children's Services Regulations 2009* introduced new qualification requirements and improved staff:child ratios for licensed education and care services in Victoria, with further changes to ratios and qualifications included in the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care Services. As part of the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NPECE), all jurisdictions have committed to implementing the Commonwealth's election commitment to providing universal access to 15 hours of a quality kindergarten program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in the year before school by 2013.

Driving these reforms is an increased understanding of the importance of the time from birth to eight years of age and a desire to provide high quality services that support the learning and development of children. Reforms such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) introduced frameworks to support early childhood professionals to provide quality services. Additional reform in Victoria includes the revision of the MCH Key Ages and Stages framework to realign activities with current evidence and a project to reform ECI services that will include the development of an evidence-based service delivery model. The importance of the early childhood workforce in achieving these reforms lies in international research that a highly-skilled, qualified and motivated workforce is essential to achieving the delivery of high-quality early childhood services that support children's learning and development.¹

As well as introducing a range of state-based reforms, Victoria is working towards implementation of the National Quality Agenda (NQA). On 5 October 2010, the Victorian Parliament passed the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* and received royal assent on 12 October 2010. The National Law provides the legislative background for the National Quality Framework (NQF). As it is national applied laws legislation, other participating jurisdictions will also pass the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* as template legislation, except for Western Australia which will pass its own corresponding legislation.

The Victorian Government aims to help create an environment in which all families have a chance to achieve their aspirations, including having access to quality education.² Achieving quality reforms in early childhood and meeting the increased demand for services arising from an increased birth rate and changing patterns of service use by families, requires sustained effort. In Victoria the initial focus has been and continues to be attracting enough qualified early childhood professionals to deliver services. Alongside this work Victoria is undertaking a range of initiatives to support the workforce to meet the challenges arising from quality reforms. Future work will include joining with our partners to build the professional capacity of the workforce.

¹ OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD, Paris.

² State Government of Victoria (2011), *2011 Victorian Families Statement*, <http://premier.vic.gov.au/our-commitment/>

1.1 Overview

This submission highlights the following considerations for the Productivity Commission

- Significant national reform is taking place reflecting evidence on the importance of early childhood for children's development and the long-term benefits to society. The early childhood workforce is central to this agenda.
- There is an evident need to increase the number of qualified early childhood professionals to meet growing demand for services and deliver on national reforms.
- This need is most clear in early childhood education and care; however there is a need to grow and develop all areas of the early childhood development workforce.
- Development of a clear evidence-based framework for early childhood workforce skills has the potential to support improved efficiency and effectiveness of the early childhood workforce.
- Higher education and training for the early childhood workforce must support our aspirations for a skilled and professional workforce through the delivery of quality training and provision of sufficient training opportunities to respond to the immediate increased demand for qualified professionals.
- The diversity in the sector supports innovation and responsiveness to child and family needs; however there is a need to ensure that early childhood professionals collaborate effectively across services and disciplines.
- There is a need to establish a stronger culture of professionalism and a culture of continuous learning throughout the early childhood sector, linked to state and national frameworks that define quality practice and service delivery.
- All levels of government, along with other stakeholders have a continued role in supporting the early childhood workforce.

2 Scope and definition

2.1 Victoria's Early Childhood Development workforce

The focus of this submission is on early childhood development professionals who work directly with children in early childhood settings funded or regulated by DEECD and includes professionals working with children in Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services. Across the State more than 30,000 Victorians are working to meet the health, learning and development needs of children from birth to eight.

2.1.1 Current Victorian definition of early childhood development (ECD) workforce

2.1.1.1 Early childhood educators

Early childhood educators are defined as all early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in education and care settings. This includes unqualified, certificate-qualified, diploma-qualified and degree-qualified educators working in all early childhood education and care settings. These settings include long day care, family day care, occasional care, OSHC and kindergarten.

The *Victorian Children's Services Regulations 2009* introduced a minimum training requirement for early childhood educators of a Certificate III in Children's Services or other approved qualification. This minimum training requirement is also included in the National Quality Framework. The requirement to hold or be working towards a Certificate III is being phased in from 2014.

Early childhood teachers in Victoria are required to hold a qualification that has been approved or is deemed equivalent to approved qualifications. A list of approved qualifications for early childhood teachers are published in the Victorian Government Gazette, with an update to this list due to occur in early 2011 to reflect the changing qualifications environment. Early Childhood Australia-Victoria Branch (ECA-V) is engaged by DEECD to make recommendations regarding the approval of early childhood qualifications at all levels. The ECA-V Qualifications Approval Committee comprises representatives from Victorian higher education and training providers, and makes recommendations against agreed specifications for course content, teaching staff and practicum arrangements. Some approved early childhood teaching qualifications also allow teachers to work in primary schools, and are also approved by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (the Institute).

Early childhood teachers and other educators are not currently required to be registered, however the Victorian Government is considering registering early childhood teachers through the Institute, with an indicative commencement date of September 2012. The Institute is currently working with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on the development of nationally consistent teacher registration and accreditation of pre-service teacher education programs. This work currently relates only to school teachers; however the inclusion of early childhood teachers in some aspects of AITSL's work is being considered. Currently, registration of other early childhood educators through a state or national body has not been proposed.

Early childhood educators are employed by a range of organisations including local government, community-based and privately owned education and care services and schools. They are employed under a variety of industrial arrangements including the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Assistants Agreement (VECTAA) 2010, the Local Government Early Childhood Education Employees Agreement (LGECEEA) 2010, the Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2010 and the Children's Services Award 2010. These industrial arrangements provide for different wage structures and employment conditions.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that many early childhood teachers as well as other educators choose to work through recruitment agencies, to take advantage of the flexibility offered by casual employment. Exact numbers of agency-employed educators are not known, however it is important to consider this group as they hold a crucial role in enabling educators employed by services to attain time release for study and professional learning, as discussed later in this submission.

Current demographic data regarding early childhood educators is limited. The data needs for early childhood development are discussed later in this submission. The 2006 report on *the National Children's Services Workforce Study* provides the most comprehensive data about all early childhood educators, however with significant reform occurring since then the data should be used with caution. DEECD gathers data annually regarding the delivery of funded kindergarten programs, including some data regarding the workforce.

In 2009, the average age of teachers delivering a funded kindergarten program was 42 with about 28 per cent of teachers in metropolitan regions aged 50 or over and about 35 per cent of teachers in rural regions aged 50 or over. Over one third of teachers commenced their teaching career in the past decade. Kindergarten assistants had an average age of 44 and only 17 per cent held an early childhood qualification. Many more kindergarten assistants will now be working towards the minimum training requirement.

2.1.1.2 Maternal and Child Health nurses

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses deliver the MCH service, a universal primary health service available for all Victorian families with children aged from birth to school entry. MCH nurses are registered nurses, registered midwives and have additional qualifications in Child and Family Health. MCH nurses are employed by local government who jointly fund the universal MCH service with the Victorian Government. In 2009–10 there were 925 nurses employed to deliver the MCH service. The workforce is ageing with 84.5 per cent of nurses aged over 45 and the majority of nurses work part-time (71.5 per cent). Staff turn-over is minimal; nurses tend to remain in the field for many years. DEECD also employs approximately 40 MCH nurses to provide 24 hour advice/support to parents experiencing difficulties with infant children through the MCH Information Line. The MCH Information Line also has a low staff turn-over rate but experiences difficulties attracting MCH nurses to undertake the night-shift.

A new national registration and accreditation scheme for nurses and midwives began on 1 July 2010 and a new National Law (*the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act 2009*) came into effect to regulate the profession. Under these new arrangements the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia is responsible for setting standards and policies for the regulation of all nurses and midwives registered in Australia. It will be supported in this task by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulatory Agency. Prior to the passing of this law these functions were managed by the Nurses Board of Victoria.

2.1.2 Early Childhood Intervention professionals

The Victorian Government funds 73 Community Service Organisations (CSOs), local government organisations and nine regional DEECD offices to provide a range of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services to children from birth to school entry with disabilities or other developmental concerns and their families. These services include:

- Early Childhood Intervention places supplemented by short term additional support through Flexible Support packages
- Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages to support the inclusion of children with severe disabilities in kindergarten programs
- Preschool Field Officer consultancy services to support the inclusion of children with developmental concerns in kindergarten.

The nine DEECD regional offices also manage the intake process for new referrals.

ECI professionals come from a range of allied health and education backgrounds including; early childhood teaching, special education, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology, speech pathology and social work. They are employed by DEECD (about one third) and local government/CSOs funded to deliver ECI services (about two thirds). Qualification requirements are set by individual employers, however, ECI services tend to employ professionals with a range of qualifications in order to provide a suite of services that meet the needs of children and their families. Industrial arrangements vary depending on the employing organisation. Organisations delivering ECI services vary in size from single-site operations to state wide services; this impacts on the organisation's capacity to attract, retain and support their workforce.

Limited data regarding the ECI workforce is available. Some data has been collected as part of the ECI Reform Project which indicates that the ECI workforce is predominately female with approximately half the workforce employed on a part-time basis. The number of children who received an ECI service in 2008-09 was 12,541.

Also under the ECI umbrella are specific support services which focus on inclusion support for children attending funded kindergarten programs and child care services. The Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) Program facilitates the access and participation of children with additional needs including but not limited to disability in funded kindergarten programs, through the provision of consultative support, resourcing and advice to early childhood teachers and families. Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages provide supplementary funding for resources, professional development, additional staffing and other initiatives to support the inclusion of children with severe disabilities and high support needs in a funded kindergarten program. The Inclusion Support Program, funded by the Commonwealth Government and delivered by Inclusion Support Agencies assists child care services to include children with additional needs.

For the purposes of this submission the kindergarten and child care inclusion workforce will also be included when referring to the ECI workforce. PSFOs are typically required to hold an early childhood teaching qualification and often have additional special education qualifications. Additional assistants employed through Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages are not required to hold a qualification, however, may hold a Certificate III in Children's Services. PSFOs and additional assistants are employed by a similar range of non-government organisations as other ECI professionals. Inclusion Support Facilitators are employed by Inclusion Support Agencies which include local government and CSOs.

2.1.3 Aboriginal early childhood workers

The Aboriginal early childhood workforce in Victoria includes a workforce focused specifically on providing high-quality ECD services to Aboriginal families and communities. These roles include Koorie Education Co-ordinators (KECs), Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs), Koorie Preschool Assistants (KPSAs), Aboriginal In-Home Support workers, Aboriginal Home Based Learning workers and Aboriginal people working as early childhood educators in universal education and care services.

- KECs are employed by DEECD to coordinate and implement the regional plan for the Wannik Education Strategy for Koorie students and early childhood initiatives to ensure that there is a collaborative and consistent strategy for Koorie education in Victoria. They provide a strategic link between relevant DEECD employees and external agencies, and targeted and effective professional development for key kindergarten, school, regional and community agency personnel. Nine KECs are employed across the State to work with children and students aged from birth to 18 years.
- KESOs are employed by DEECD to coordinate and implement targeted education programs for Aboriginal children and young people. This includes working with families and services to promote access and participation of Aboriginal children and young people in kindergartens and schools, providing expert advice to kindergarten and school communities about models of effective support, liaising with other stakeholders to promote positive partnerships and developing collaborative initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. The KESO workforce works with children and students aged from birth to 18 years, and consists of 109 EFT positions.
- KPSAs are employed by non-government organisations and work directly with children and families in education and care services to promote access and participation.
- Aboriginal In-Home Support workers are employed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to work with Aboriginal families to strengthen, support and improve their parenting capacity and so improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of Aboriginal children aged birth to three years.
- Aboriginal Home Based Learning workers are also employed by ACCOs to support Aboriginal families to provide improved home learning environments and empower parents as the primary educators of their children in the home.

These groups constitute a small number of Aboriginal early childhood workers. Where Aboriginal early childhood workers are discussed later in this submission the reference is primarily to those individuals working in education and care services.

The KEC and KESO roles were established in recognition that the workforce plays a vital role in engaging families and supporting Aboriginal children and young people, particularly through key transition points. The KEC and KESO workforce is made up of Aboriginal people with a range of qualifications, including early childhood qualifications, and experience. KECs and KESOs are employed in each of DEECD's nine regions.

The KPSA, Aboriginal In-Home Support and Aboriginal Home Based Learning programs are targeted programs delivered to selected communities. While there are no qualification requirements for these workforces, there are certain skills that are desirable, specifically the ability to create an inclusive, flexible environment that is family-oriented.

2.1.4 Alignment of terms of reference with Victorian definitions

The *Early Childhood Development Workforce Productivity Commission Issues Paper* (Issues Paper) refers to three workforce groups within the Early Childhood Development sector:

- early childhood education and care workforce,
- child health & family support workforce,
- workforce for children with additional needs.

For the purposes of this submission, early childhood educators align with the early childhood education and care workforce, MCH nurses align with the child health & family support workforce, and the ECI workforce aligns with both the child health & family support workforce and the workforce for children with additional needs. The roles of the Aboriginal early childhood workers specified above span all three workforce groups.

2.1.5 The Victorian Context

There are a number of differences in how the ECD workforce is defined in Victoria, in comparison to other states and territories:

2.1.6 Birth to eight

The importance of the time from birth to eight years of age is now widely recognised and supported by evidence from both neurological and social sciences. During this period, children experience more rapid brain development and acquire more skills and knowledge than at any other period in their lives. This evidence has informed Victoria's decision to adopt a birth to eight approach to early childhood services. An example of this is the VEYLDF; a framework designed to advance children's learning and development from birth to eight years.

2.1.7 Qualifications

In addition to the compulsory units for their qualification, early childhood educators holding Diploma or Certificate III level qualifications in children's services must have successfully completed the unit relating to providing care for babies. The recognised qualifications for educators working in OSHC services include units relating to school aged children and may not include units relating to providing care for babies.

Approved early childhood teaching qualifications include course content and practicum arrangements to include working with children aged birth to three. This arises from a strong belief in the importance of early childhood educators developing an understanding of children's learning and development from birth onwards, irrespective of the age group with which they intend to work following graduation. The importance of this requirement is reinforced by the NQF requirement for all long day care and kindergarten services to employ a qualified early childhood teacher.

A number of the approved early childhood teaching qualifications in Victoria are three years in duration. This differs from requirements in some other states and territories, and the four-year trained teacher requirement set out in the NPECE.

While the Victorian Government aspires to establish a four-year degree as the base level qualification in the future, Victoria is currently focused on achieving the number of qualified early childhood teachers required to meet our obligations under the current reform agenda, including retaining our current three-year trained teachers in the workforce. This is reflected in Victoria's bilateral agreement under the NPECE.

Victoria is the only state that requires MCH nurses to have nursing and midwifery qualifications as well as qualifications in child and family health. This reflects the importance of understanding the ante-natal period and the birth process in providing best practice post-natal support to mothers and babies.

Unlike some other states, Victoria does not currently have any qualification requirements for managers of education and care services. Discussion about emerging skill requirements of managers of integrated education and care services is discussed later in this submission.

2.1.8 Workforce mobility across roles and jurisdictions

It is appropriate to specify different qualification requirements for employment in different roles in the ECD sector, particularly where those roles have specific duties and requirements. It is desirable, however, that there is consistency in the underpinning knowledge and behavioural competencies associated with qualifications for early childhood professionals. This is particularly important for early childhood educators, where there are a range of positions for people at different qualification levels. The content of qualifications should build on the knowledge and skills gained in the previous qualification, with early childhood teaching degrees building on the Diploma of Children's Services, which in turn should build on the skills and knowledge attained in the Certificate III in Children's Services. This not only supports consistency of practice but also provides coherent career paths for early childhood educators and a shared language across the workforce.

Qualifications for early childhood educators are increasingly delivered across two sectors; the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and the higher-education sector. Some TAFEs have commenced delivery of early childhood teaching degree courses, which is considered to be a positive move in terms of access and continuity of learning. With an increasing number of course providers and growing demand for qualified early childhood educators, there is an ongoing challenge to meet the increased demand for suitably qualified academic staff to deliver early childhood qualifications.

Consistency of underpinning knowledge is also important to respond to the increasing demand for an integrated approach to service provision, including skills for all ECD professionals in working collaboratively across services and disciplines. To date, DEECD has provided contributory grants towards the development of 104 integrated children's centres, which integrate education and care services with other services including MCH, ECI and family support services. It may be of benefit to develop a set of common core skills and knowledge for all early childhood professionals to support the delivery of integrated services, including for those professionals not employed in integrated education and care services. These skills would complement the specialist skills held by individual workforces and may include family-centred practice, brain development of young children, diversity and cultural awareness and working collaboratively with other professionals.

The Issues Paper questions whether the existence of multiple unions and professional associations for the ECD workforce also impacts on workforce mobility, including capacity for innovation in the employment of early childhood professionals. Examples exist of employers and other stakeholders working in partnership to devise innovative solutions in the interests of workforce effectiveness and productivity. A good example of unions and peak organisations working together in the interests of their members is the VECTAA (2010), where the Australian Education Union and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union negotiated a single interest agreement covering early childhood teachers with Kindergarten Parents Victoria representing employers. Despite this and other examples of innovation the Victorian Government recognises the need for consistency and transparency in the system, and support for workers in pursuing rewarding career paths through this diverse industrial environment.

There is no doubt that different qualification requirements have an impact on the mobility of the early childhood development workforce between jurisdictions. The implementation of the NQF for education and care services will take steps to achieving this for early childhood educators. The new national regulations will set in place consistent qualification requirements across Australia. The new national body is providing oversight of the system and will have responsibility for determining which qualifications will be recognised for early childhood teachers and other educators.

An aspirational but realistic approach must be taken to the introduction of changed workforce qualification requirements. Transitional arrangements such as those in the *Victorian Children's Services Regulations 2009* allow services time to comply with new requirements, and provides time for the workforce to undertake any necessary further study to meet the minimum training requirements. These arrangements, alongside the staged approach to workforce support discussed later in the submission, will enable longer-term goals for the early childhood workforce to be achieved while retaining and sustaining the existing strengths and capability of the ECD sector.

2.1.9 Data describing the ECD workforce

Victoria is fortunate to have strong data sets collected annually for the MCH workforce, and for teachers and assistants in Victorian funded kindergarten programs. Work has commenced to gather further data about the ECI workforce, in part to inform the ECI Reform Project. There is however a pressing need for a better data set about the early childhood workforce as a whole. The involvement of a range of employers and the mixed role of the Victorian, Commonwealth and local Governments in the early childhood sector means there is no one organisation in a position to collect and collate data regarding the entire ECD workforce.

The National Workforce Census conducted by the Commonwealth Government in 2010 will provide the most comprehensive data about early childhood educators since the *National Children's Services Workforce Study 2006*, which contains data collected in 2004. In light of the significant reform in early childhood since that time, including recent reforms which have implications for the number of educators required and qualification requirements for early childhood educators this data is urgently needed to make judgements about whether the current level of effort is sufficient to deliver the workforce needed for the future. As well as meeting immediate data needs, there is a need for improved alignment between data collections for different groups within the ECD workforce, to ensure the ongoing availability of up-to-date data to inform future workforce planning and support.

3 Workforce demand and supply

3.1 Workforce demand

3.1.1 Impact of government policy on demand for ECD workforce

The current policy environment (as outlined in the Introduction) will have a significant impact on demand for early childhood professionals, especially qualified workers in early childhood education and care. In particular, workforce demand will be generated by new qualification requirements and staff:child ratios in the *Victorian Children's Services Regulations 2009* and National Quality Framework, as show below:

2010 to 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1:15 staff to child ratios for school aged children• 1:30 qualified staff to child ratios for school aged children• All Family Day Care staff providing training, advice, supervision and monitoring of family day carers to have a Diploma-level or higher qualification
By 1 January 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1:4 staff to child ratios for children aged under 3 years• 1:12 qualified staff to child ratios for children aged under 3 years
By 1 January 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All long day care and preschool services to employ a qualified early childhood teacher• 50 per cent of educators to have (or be actively working towards) a Diploma-level or higher qualification• All remaining educators to have (or be actively working towards) a Certificate III qualification (or equivalent)
By 1 January 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1:11 staff to child ratios for children aged 3 years and over
By 1 January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All long day care and preschool services with 60 children or more to employ a second early childhood teacher, or another suitably qualified leader

The greatest impact of these reforms is likely to be felt at the level of degree-qualified early childhood teachers. In 2009, only 409 Victorian long day care centres employed a degree-qualified early childhood teacher delivering a funded kindergarten program, and 660 did not. Demand for qualified teachers will be further increased by the commitment to 15 hours of kindergarten per week for all children in the year before school. The longer lead times to train early childhood teachers, compared to professionals at other qualification levels, adds to the urgent need for strategies to expand the teaching workforce. It is likely that workforce demand will impact especially on non-metropolitan areas, where it is more difficult to attract degree-qualified professionals.

3.1.2 Impact of other factors on demand for ECD services and workforce

A range of additional factors are increasing demand for early childhood services in Victoria, and consequently demand for qualified early childhood professionals. Victoria has experienced a "baby boom" in recent years, with an approximate 20 per cent net increase in births between 1999 and 2009. DEECD's Maternal and Child Health Service Annual Report for 2009-10 gives 73,827 birth notifications, a significant increase from 60,537 recorded in 2000-01. Usage of education and care services has increased, as more Victorians access formal care to help balance work and family commitments. There is also growing awareness among families of the benefits of quality early childhood services, shifting from a focus on school preparation to a broader interest in child development, although this awareness is still in its early stages and there is substantial scope for it to increase demand for quality education and care services. For ECI services, additional demand has been created by population growth as well as earlier identification of children with disabilities such as Autism and improved survival rates for very premature children and those with severe disabilities.

A number of Victorian Government indicators identify demand and supply issues with respect to qualified early childhood workers:

- Between 600–800 additional teachers will be required by 2012–13 in order for Victoria to implement Universal Access by 2013.³ Additional teachers will be further needed to meet requirements under the NQF. The extent to which these requirements will cross-over is difficult to predict. Further demands for early childhood teachers arise from the increased birth rate and the likely retirement in coming years of the significant proportion of early childhood teachers over the age of 50.
- Significant demand exists for Diploma-qualified educators in the OSHC sector, based on the number of exemptions granted to these services to enable them to continue to operate under new regulations. In 2010–11, 285 exemptions for qualified staff were granted to OSHC services, compared to 35 for standard licensed services (kindergarten and long day care).
- In 2006, the report on the National Children's Services Workforce Survey indicated that 42 per cent of Victorian early childhood educators had no relevant formal qualification. This percentage will have now decreased, particularly given the availability of Victorian Government scholarship and grandfathering programs, however significant demand may still exist in the sector to attain the Certificate III.
- In 2010, five services in rural/regional Victoria received approval to be funded outside the Victorian Kindergarten Policy Procedures and Funding Criteria (VKP) due to difficulties recruiting a qualified early childhood teacher.⁴ This indicates some level of difficulty with staff recruitment for rural services. Uptake of the Employment Incentives for Early Childhood Educators scheme (described in the following section) also indicates services seeking assistance to recruit qualified staff.
- Data indicates that the MCH and early childhood teaching workforces are ageing, especially in non-metropolitan areas. While this indicates a high level of stability and experience in these sectors, it raises concern about workforce supply as these professionals approach retirement.
- Data returned from the current ECI services mapping survey indicates 45 per cent to 50 per cent of ECI services currently have at least one staff vacancy, and frequently report recruitment and retention difficulties especially in rural and remote areas.

The increased use of early childhood services (and associated demand for staff) may still not reflect the full extent of service demand. Decisions about using early childhood services are often made by families based on location and availability rather than preference, and latent demand may exist that is not being met by current service provision. Cost is another factor which impacts on participation in early childhood services, especially for disadvantaged families. Research commissioned in 2006 by the Department of Human Services as part of the *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures* project identified that vulnerable families are those most likely not to be participating in education and care services, and that barriers to access include cost.

It is beyond the scope of this submission to fully explore all factors impacting on early childhood service participation. However, service cost does fall within the scope of workforce issues, as new regulations to increase the qualification levels of the early childhood workforce and the staff:child ratios will impact on wages and therefore on cost. The cost of services is an important consideration in implementing workforce reforms, to ensure that they do not have an adverse effect on affordability and therefore participation.

³ Victorian NPECE Bilateral Agreement, www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/national_partnership_agreements/ED005/VIC_Bilateral_agreement_ECE.pdf

⁴ The VKP requires kindergarten programs to be delivered by a staff member holding an approved early childhood teaching qualification. Rural services unable to recruit a qualified early childhood teacher may seek approval to employ a primary teacher where children would have no access to a kindergarten service if funding were not approved. For any appointment longer than 12 weeks, other than a temporary appointment to cover extended sick leave, the primary teacher must be enrolled in a course to achieve an approved early childhood qualification.

3.2 Workforce supply

3.2.1 Impact of DEECD programs on supply for the ECD workforce

The Issues Paper asks to what extent new qualification requirements may be a barrier to entering the ECD sector. While acknowledging that increased qualifications may be a barrier to some people entering or remaining in the profession, they assist in defining and upholding the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively in the sector. The absence of such requirements risks reinforcing a prevailing myth that working with children does not require specialised training and skills, which has been disproved by the growing body of evidence about the importance of skilled, qualified workers in achieving quality outcomes for children and families. These requirements may impact positively on workforce supply, by increasing professionalism and helping position ECD as a valued and attractive career.

A range of Victorian Government initiatives have provided support for the early childhood workforce, including initiatives to assist the sector to respond to new qualifications requirements:

- The Early Childhood Qualifications Fund offers support for early childhood educators to gain higher qualifications, as well as primary-trained teachers wanting to undertake postgraduate study to transition into early childhood teaching. Over 240 scholarships have been awarded under the Fund, including 145 for unqualified educators to undertake Certificate III and 59 for Diploma-qualified educators to complete early childhood teaching degrees. This builds on DEECD's previous scholarship schemes to support existing early childhood educators to gain Certificate III level and Diploma level qualifications and early childhood teaching degrees, under which over 650 educators were offered support. Future funding for this scheme and a range of workforce initiatives will be made available from the National Partnership on Early Childhood Education to support the transition to implementation.
- To ensure that skilled, experienced but unqualified staff members and family day carers may be retained in the sector, educators with substantial and current experience has offered the opportunity to complete an approved professional development course, in lieu of meeting the minimum training requirements of the *Children's Services Regulations 2009*. DEECD has funded the provision of a 10-hour professional development course free of charge to eligible staff members and family day carers throughout the state. Under this scheme about 880 staff members and family day carers have been assessed as eligible to complete professional development in lieu of minimum training, and about 350 staff members and family day carers have completed the approved professional development course. Over 300 eligible staff members and family day carers have booked to attend the approved professional development course in 2011.
- Staff members and family day carers who complete the approved course may apply to DEECD for assistance to complete approved certificate-level training through Recognition of Current Competency/Recognition of Prior Learning (RCC/RPL).
- Aboriginal Early Childhood Teacher Scholarships have provided fee support and a living allowance to Aboriginal early childhood educators holding a Diploma in Children's Services to upgrade their qualification to an early childhood teaching degree. Recipients undertake their study at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University who offer an on-campus intensive study block delivery method. Twenty-seven Aboriginal early childhood educators have been offered support with ten students successfully completing their qualification since the commencement of the program in 2007.
- Employment Incentives for Early Childhood Educators provide a financial incentive to early childhood teachers and Diploma-qualified staff to take up work in hard-to-staff positions. Licensed education and care services that have a current or forthcoming vacancy for an early childhood teacher or a Diploma-qualified early childhood educator are eligible to apply. Over 40 services have applied successfully to offer incentives, to date 10 early childhood educators have been appointed to these incentive-eligible positions.
- Career advice is available to early childhood educators trained outside Victoria to support them to meet Victorian qualification requirements. Where further study is required, funding to undertake gap training may also be made available.

- In November 2004, the MCH Workforce Project to support recruitment and retention was initiated to address the issues raised in the MCH Workforce Assessment. DEECD funded the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to lead the project as the overarching organisation supporting local government, the employer of MCH nurses. The project's ongoing work has included overseeing the MCH scholarship program (below), organisation and support for career expos at RMIT and LaTrobe University, promotion of the re-entry course for MCH, a survey to determine the factors affecting the conversion rate of MCH postgraduates into employment and raising the profile of MCH nursing as a career.
- The MCH Nursing Scholarships program was developed to help address workforce shortages, targeted to high priority areas where there are difficulties recruiting and retaining staff. To date, 114 scholarships have been awarded. Of recipients who have graduated, 83 per cent are currently employed as MCH nurses in local government.
- The ECI New Graduate and Rural Incentives support suitably qualified professionals to take up work in ECI services. Recipients receive a financial incentive and are required to work for two years in a service funded by DEECD to deliver ECI services. Incentives are also available for supporting students to undertake placements in rural ECI services.

Given the scale of current workforce reforms, Victoria has adopted a staged approach to supporting the early childhood workforce, to allow support to be targeted at priority groups over a number of years. The range of initiatives above and the staged implementation is similar to the approach taken by the New Zealand government in pursuing a large-scale upgrade of early childhood workforce qualifications. Overall, it reflects the need for continued cooperation between all stakeholders to develop the ECD workforce, from meeting immediate workforce needs to creating the conditions for a sustainable workforce supply.

3.2.2 Impact of other factors on supply for the ECD workforce

3.2.2.1 Attractiveness of the early childhood sector

Another significant influence on ECD workforce supply is the attractiveness of ECD careers, both in themselves, and in comparison to other sectors with which ECD must compete for staff. Anecdotal evidence from early childhood stakeholders and research commissioned by DEECD indicates that wages and conditions are an important consideration for potential entrants to the early childhood sector when making career decisions.

An associated issue is the status of the early childhood profession. Raising the profile and status of ECD careers will be essential as part of a long-term strategy to attract a broader range of people to the sector. There is particular need to promote the profession to groups currently under-represented in the early childhood workforce, including Aboriginal Victorians (discussed below) and males. Increased professionalism and growing recognition of the importance of quality early childhood development, as discussed later in the submission, will also support community perceptions of the attractiveness of ECD careers.

3.2.2.2 Availability of higher education and training

A number of other factors impact on the supply of qualified early childhood educators. A critical factor is the ability of the higher education and training sector to respond to demand for courses leading to early childhood qualifications. The provision of additional Commonwealth Supported Places in early childhood higher education courses has improved the accessibility of courses, potentially further supported by the shift to demand-driven funding for higher education.

Consultations undertaken by DEECD with Victorian universities in November 2010 revealed a wide variety of study options for early childhood teaching degrees, including undergraduate courses and postgraduate teacher preparation courses for those holding degrees from other disciplines. Early childhood teaching degrees are offered at seven Victorian universities, with a further university currently completing the Early Childhood Australia (Victoria) approval process for a new early childhood course. Many Victorian early childhood students also choose to study at Charles Sturt University in NSW, which offers an early childhood teaching qualification through distance learning.

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector is more complex with a wide array of study options for Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses in children's services. Preliminary findings from DEECD's current research into course provision indicate that 103 providers from the TAFE, Adult and Community Education (ACE) and private sectors offer VET courses leading to an early childhood qualification (including qualifications for work in OSHC). Of these, around 100 offer the Certificate III in Children's Services, around 70 offer the Diploma in Children's Services and only 18 offer the Advanced Diploma in Children's Services. The Certificate IV and Diploma in Outside School Hours Care are offered at 25 and 18 providers respectively.

Skills reform in Victoria has improved access to VET courses, including early childhood qualifications. The Victorian Training Guarantee enables all eligible students to obtain a subsidised place in a Certificate III in Children's Services course. Skills reform provides a limited number of additional discretionary subsidised places to institutions, to support students training in an area of need who are ineligible for the Training Guarantee. The Commonwealth Government has also supported access to early childhood qualifications by providing fee-free Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in Children's Services. VET FEE HELP, the Australian Government loan scheme for the VET sector, provides a further opportunity for support. The extent to which these Commonwealth supports have supported the workforce in gaining higher qualifications should be examined, including consideration of the National Partnership Agreement on TAFE Fee Waivers for Childcare Qualifications.

"Pathways" courses are offered at most Victorian universities offering early childhood qualifications, which enable Diploma-qualified early childhood educators to gain credit towards a teaching degree. These courses play an important role in building career pathways for Victorian early childhood educators, from Certificate III to Diploma to Degree qualifications. They also provide an opportunity to capitalise on existing workforce strengths, to expedite the urgently-needed growth in teacher numbers. The 2010 university consultations suggest that the majority of Pathways students make a successful transition from the VET to university learning environment. Many Pathways students continue working while they study, often meaning that they enrol part-time and complete the course over an extended period of time, in comparison with full-time students.

Seven Victorian universities currently offer teacher preparation courses that lead to a dual qualification that will enable graduates to teach in either early childhood or primary school settings. These courses support knowledge transfer and collaboration between the primary and early childhood workforces, and reinforce Victoria's birth-to-eight early childhood approach. However, stakeholder consultation has indicated that the majority of students in these courses intend to enter primary teaching rather than early childhood careers. DEECD has commissioned research to explore the motivations, critical decision points and influences on career choice for these students, and develop recommendations for a program to support students to choose early childhood careers (reports to be available March 2011).

Access to higher education and training courses continues to be a challenge for the early childhood workforce, as most students, especially those already working in the sector, must engage in paid employment to some extent while they study. Course availability in non-metropolitan areas is a particular challenge, although the increasing use of online, flexible delivery or "intensive" course structures has expanded the options available to rural and regional students, including courses delivered interstate. DEECD is currently undertaking further research to map the provision of courses leading to an early childhood qualification.

Another challenge for the delivery of early childhood higher education and training is the availability of qualified teaching staff. All universities involved in recent consultations reported challenges in recruiting staff especially at senior levels, as well as noting a tension between the need for early childhood academic staff and the desirability of high-performing teachers remaining in the sector. More work is needed by all stakeholders to encourage highly skilled educators to engage in research and higher qualifications, which will further support the growth of professionalism and career pathways in the sector.

Completion of VET and higher education qualifications require levels of literacy and numeracy that present as challenges to groups who have missed out on foundational education, or for whom English is a second language. These challenges can generally be overcome if there is preparedness to provide students with the appropriate level of support during their study, and assessment is individualised and contextualised. Recent consultations suggest that this support is available at all Victorian universities offering early childhood teaching degrees. However, the increasing level of documentation required in early childhood services and the requirement that all staff can respond to complex medical emergencies (such as anaphylaxis and asthma) requires a minimum level of English literacy for all staff employed in education and care services, and suggests a need for English requirements even at Certificate III level.

3.2.3 Supply of Aboriginal early childhood educators

The supply of Aboriginal early childhood educators is an issue for specific Aboriginal services such as the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), of which there are six in Victoria, and the new Aboriginal Children and Family Centres, of which there are two planned for Victoria, as well as in universal services. DEECD recognises that Aboriginal Victorians may face additional barriers to entering ECD careers that may be addressed by targeted supports. Aboriginal people may sometimes lack information regarding career opportunities in ECD, due to limited exposure to the sector or quality information about what a career in the sector would entail. More needs to be done to attract Aboriginal people to ECD careers through promotional and engagement efforts.

Aboriginal people are also under-represented in higher education, have higher levels of unemployment and are generally over-represented in lower income fields. They are also less likely to have completed Year 12 and more likely to have had negative experiences at school. Therefore they may require targeted supports to ensure both entry and completion of ECD qualifications. Promotion and financial assistance is particularly important to encourage Aboriginal people to complete qualifications. Aboriginal people may also desire to complete their qualification as part of an Indigenous-specific cohort, tailored specifically for the needs of the group. Education providers that offer such arrangements in a culturally sensitive way are more likely to achieve success. Targeted scholarships and other financial assistance, along with an increased number of providers willing to run Aboriginal specific cohorts where required, will help address barriers to Aboriginal Victorians working in early childhood.

DEECD's Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Fund will support Aboriginal Victorians to work in ECD careers across all qualification levels. DEECD is currently working with relevant stakeholders and the Commonwealth to develop the program to commence in 2011. This initiative builds on the Aboriginal Early Childhood Teacher Scholarship scheme in which DEECD provides fee support and a living allowance for attendance at study intensives for Diploma-qualified Aboriginal early childhood educators to study to qualify as early childhood teachers. Recipients undertake their qualification at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University.

The high dispersion of the Aboriginal population in Victoria means that in some education and care services the Koorie cohort can be as small as one or two children. Professional learning activities that support cultural confidence and competence in working in partnership with Aboriginal families, children and communities are therefore important for all early childhood educators.

3.3 Career structure, professionalism and retention

Job satisfaction data for early childhood educators is available in the 2006 report on the National Children's Services Workforce Study. The study found that the Victorian education and care workforce had a high level of job satisfaction overall, with 87 per cent of children's services respondents strongly or slightly agreeing that they were satisfied with their job. Updated data on job satisfaction will be available in the forthcoming report on the 2010 National Workforce Census.

Anecdotal evidence regarding job satisfaction for ECI professionals indicates high commitment to their work, but stress in coping with increasing workload and family complexity, dissatisfaction at perceived lack of ability to provide services at the level desired/required and at long waiting lists for services at odds with their understanding of the importance of early and timely interventions. Career paths are also lacking for ECI professionals, who see their only career move as into management positions and away from direct client work.

Despite high levels of job satisfaction and commitment, retention remains a challenge for the ECD sector, with high staff turnover in some services. For teachers in Victorian funded kindergarten programs, staff turnover is most evident in programs located in long day care centres. In 2009, 40.8 per cent of teachers who were in their first year of employment at that service were located in long day care, compared to 25.7 per cent of teachers overall. Educators in kindergarten services run by volunteer committees face additional challenges, due to the potentially high turnover of management personnel and management structures.

Staff retention is an ongoing issue for OSHC services. Due to the typically part-time nature of this work and the requirement to work split shifts the workforce is generally employed on a casual or part-time basis. A significant proportion of this workforce is made up of students studying to achieve qualifications in other fields. Anecdotal evidence indicates that, as many educators complete the minimum training and qualification requirements, they are attracted to full-time permanent employment in other education and care services.

Conversely, the annual workforce data collection for MCH services shows retention is strong in this sector, with minimal staff turnover and nurses tending to remain within the field for many years.

3.3.1 Building rewarding careers

A key factor in improving retention for the ECD workforce is supporting the development of rewarding career paths for ECD professionals. Changing staffing structures, especially in long day care services, provide new opportunities for leadership and professional growth, with the potential for degree-qualified teachers to take on pedagogical leadership roles. The increase in integrated services also creates opportunities for leadership of larger service structures and cross-disciplinary teams. In addition, the renewed emphasis on quality in early childhood services has generated demand for expert professionals who can guide and support quality practice across a range of services. Local government and cluster management arrangements can support the creation of expert roles across multiple services.

Since 2010, DEECD has offered two leadership development courses for early childhood professionals through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, to provide training and support to current and future leaders in the sector. It has also incorporated an award for the early childhood sector into the Victorian Education Excellence Awards, as well as continuing the Early Years Awards, as a further opportunity to recognise and celebrate quality practice. Further opportunities for early childhood professionals to build rewarding careers are offered through the existence of professional teaching standards at different levels of qualifications and experience, which may be enhanced by the registration of early childhood teachers through the Victorian Institute of Teaching, currently being considered.

The Issues Paper questions whether the “regulatory burden” is likely to have a significant impact on attracting or retaining ECD staff. DEECD does not see new regulatory arrangements as increasing the administrative burden on the ECD workforce, as they will streamline the process by requiring services to deal with only one regulatory/quality organisation rather than two (currently the State/Territory regulator and the National Childcare Accreditation Council). The new system is also based on a concept of “earned autonomy”, so that quality services are assessed less frequently, further reducing the burden on high-performing services.

In addition to new regulatory/quality processes, the current reform environment has generated other government resources for ECD services, including the EYLF and VEYLDF, the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative and new frameworks for ECI services and MCH. The report on the Transition Initiative did indicate some concerns about administrative workload, but positive feedback has also been received from the sector around the potential of these documents (especially the VEYLDF) to professionalise and improve recognition for ECD work. While increasing professionalism and therefore accountability, the reforms also recognise the importance of practitioner autonomy, and the VEYLDF in particular invites professionals to engage in ways that are meaningful to their own practice and context. DEECD will continue to work with the sector in implementing these reforms and recognises the need for training and support for ECD professionals to engage effectively with new regulatory and administrative processes.

Workforce quality

3.4 Defining workforce skills

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of an appropriately skilled and qualified early childhood workforce in delivering positive outcomes for children and families. Major international research, including the influential Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in the United Kingdom, has shown that workforce elements have a significant impact on outcomes, and further research in this area is currently being undertaken in Victoria through the E4Kids study at the University of Melbourne. The early childhood paradigm is shifting, as awareness grows that all ECD services are places where children's learning and development can and should be actively supported by skilled professionals. For the ECD workforce, this renewed emphasis on quality offers significant challenges as well as exciting possibilities for how their work is defined, recognised and valued.

As understanding increases of the skills, knowledge and practice that will make a difference to child and family outcomes, new resources have emerged in Australia to provide a framework for quality early childhood professional practice and the outcomes it should achieve. In Victoria, the following documents have been developed to guide practice across all early childhood services:

- The VEYLDF (building on the EYLF), setting out Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes for all professionals who work with children between the ages of birth and eight years
- The Maternal and Child Health Key Ages and Stages Framework.

Professional standards for early childhood teachers and ECI Practitioner Competencies also serve to define skills, knowledge and practice for the early childhood workforce. A notable gap is professional standards for early childhood educators at Certificate III and Diploma-qualified level who are primarily guided by the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics, endorsed in 2006. Further work could be undertaken at a national level to determine what benefits could be gained by developing professional standards for this group.

3.5 Preparing a quality early childhood workforce

The preparation of a quality early childhood workforce is the responsibility of a range of stakeholders, including higher education and training providers, employers and the workforce itself with support from government. As discussed earlier in this submission, a range of courses are available for entry into early childhood careers, delivered by both the higher education and VET sectors. Potential exists for these courses to have significant impact on lifting the quality of practice throughout the sector, and embedding the VEYLDF, EYLF and other frameworks as core foundation knowledge for all early childhood professionals.

As the number of providers of early childhood courses has grown, anecdotal evidence suggests wide variation in both their characteristics and quality, especially in the VET sector. The content of VET children's services courses is determined by National Training Packages, and the VET sector in Victoria is regulated by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA), but there remains considerable scope for variation in course duration, contact hours, teaching staff and practicum experience. DEECD is currently researching the effectiveness of Victorian VET and higher education courses leading to an early childhood qualification, including mapping the characteristics of courses and analysing the relationship between these and the effectiveness of graduates in the workforce (report to be available May 2011).

A critical issue in courses leading to early childhood qualifications is the practicum placement. Recent university consultations suggest that this is an area of concern for many Victorian higher education providers, who struggle to find services willing to take placement students, and that can demonstrate and mentor students in quality practice.

For early childhood teaching students, the required placement with infants and toddlers poses particular challenges, as most services do not currently employ teachers to work with this age group, and the role of the teacher in the service is therefore not well understood. Some Victorian universities are currently exploring options to improve this placement, by incorporating the opportunity to develop pedagogical

leadership skills. New technologies also offer new ways to support the practicum experience, including the use of digital multimedia for evidence and skills assessment.

In addition to quality higher education and training, strategies for building an effective workforce require consideration of support for new graduates in making the transition from study to the workforce. DEECD is developing a professional mentoring program with a focus on new early childhood teachers, due to commence implementation in 2011. In ECI support for new graduates and practitioners new to ECI is critical, as their undergraduate training and practical experience may not necessarily include an early childhood focus. DEECD's Professional Support Scheme aims to support professionals new to ECI to access mentoring, clinical supervision or professional development. Since the scheme commenced in 2009, 122 ECI professionals have received support.

3.6 Professional development for the early childhood workforce

Another essential component of building the effectiveness of the ECD workforce is professional development for those already working in the sector. Professional development provides an opportunity to strengthen the broad knowledge base of the sector, and to target emerging skill development needs.

3.6.1 Victorian Government professional development initiatives

DEECD offers a range of professional development opportunities to early childhood professionals to meet the skills needs described above:

- Four professional development modules have been developed to assist early childhood professionals to align their practice with the VEYLDF. These modules have been available in a face-to-face format since 2010 and are being developed for online access.
- Other programs to support engagement with the VEYLDF include a program on Contemporary Child Development Theory offered through the Bastow Institute for Educational Leadership for professionals in 2010 and a new coaching program for selected ECEC services in 2011.
- As mentioned earlier in this submission, two early childhood leadership programs are also offered through the Bastow Institute: Leading People in Early Childhood Settings, focused on human leadership skills; and Educational Leadership in Early Childhood Settings, focused on leading pedagogy and practice. These were first delivered to early childhood educators in 2010 and will be delivered to a broader range of early childhood professionals in 2011.
- Professional learning is available to support the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative.
- Eligible ECI professionals can access Postgraduate Scholarships and the Professional Support Scheme.
- Biannual conferences for MCH nurses are run in partnership with the MAV, providing knowledge-sharing and networking across MCH, all tiers of government and academia. To support access to this program, the conference is also offered via video-conference.
- Cultural Competency training for MCH has been provided, including use of interpreting services.
- Research to support quality practice is currently underway, including projects on Collaborative Practice and the VEYLDF Practice Principles, due to report in 2011.
- Work has begun nationally to support ECD workers to engage with Indigenous families and culture.
- Professional development opportunities are provided for the KEC and KESO workforce to support them to implement a birth to 18 approach to Koorie education.
- Funding for pilot projects to expand eight successful Victorian early childhood professional networks commenced in June 2010, due to be completed mid-2011.
- A mentoring program is running for recipients of incentives for early childhood teachers in long day care, and a state-wide mentoring program focused on new early childhood teachers is forthcoming.
- Joint professional development sessions for early childhood professionals, family services and Child Protection practitioners have been facilitated through Child FIRST networks, to strengthen relationships across sectors and build capacity to work with vulnerable children and families.
- DEECD is developing a role for a birth to three leading practitioner, who will have responsibility for extending the birth to three learning research agenda, promote educator-led research and build stronger connections between policy, research and practice in early childhood development.

3.6.2 Skill development needs

While the professional development provided to date has helped build the skills and knowledge of the early childhood workforce, there remains a need for further workforce development in certain areas that will be key to the achievement of improved service quality and outcomes. In addition to supporting engagement with the VEYLDF and the EYLF, the following have been identified by DEECD as priorities for strengthening workforce capacity:

- **Interdisciplinary and collaborative practice**

The growing integration of early childhood services means a fundamental shift in the way multi-disciplinary teams of childhood professionals work together. This requires all early childhood professionals to strengthen their knowledge of collaborating across services and disciplines to meet child and family needs. Early childhood educators need to form effective partnerships with other professionals involved with the children and families in their care, to share information and streamline service delivery to meet child and family needs. The key role played by Maternal and Child Nurses in supporting children and families from birth onwards also makes it essential that this group has the skills and opportunities to collaborate with other early childhood professionals.

Recent ECI research also supports the need for greater appreciation of the benefits of collaboration between ECI professionals and early childhood educators. For ECI professionals, three specific areas of skills development have been identified: consultation, coaching and collaboration. ECI professionals need to be able to act in consultative roles, including problem solving, change management, interpersonal communication, group facilitation, and skills working with organisations.

- **Inclusion and family-centred practice**

There is a need to develop skills for all early childhood professionals to implement family-centred practice. A family-centred approach will benefit all families and children using early childhood services, but will especially improve the capacity of professionals to respond to children and families with additional needs, including CALD and Aboriginal families. DEECD's work to support vulnerable children and families has also revealed an urgent need to improve the capacity of early childhood educators to respond to the needs of children and families known to Child Protection, including improving understanding of the impact of trauma and attachment issues, and referral to appropriate services. Strategies to improve workforce capacity in family-centred practice should also address the needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families, including raising awareness of the rights of these children to participate in universal early childhood programs.

- **Leadership**

The ambitious reform agenda for the early childhood sector will depend on the ability of its leaders to lead change and embrace the challenge of improving practice and service quality. There is a need to build leadership capacity in the workforce at various levels, including pedagogical leadership for teachers in long day care settings and the emerging need for leadership skills in managing multidisciplinary services and teams. DEECD's *Evaluation of Victorian Children's Centres Literature Review* suggests that professional standards and accredited courses should be developed for leaders of integrated services. As noted in the previous section, developing leadership capacity also aligns with the development of rewarding career structures for early childhood professionals to support retention in the sector.

- **Contemporary child development theory**

The rapidly expanding knowledge base about child development has created a need to ensure that all early childhood professionals' practice is informed by current theories and research. In particular, there is a need to ensure that all early childhood professionals can recognise and respond appropriately to children who are developmentally at-risk in the critical birth-to-three age range. Building the knowledge of early childhood professionals in this area should especially be considered in action plans developed by local communities identified as having high numbers of developmentally vulnerable children through the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI).

3.6.3 Future challenges in developing the early childhood workforce

Significant challenges remain in professional development for the early childhood workforce, especially in education and care services. These challenges are heightened for services in where there is a legislative requirement to maintain staff:child ratios. Feedback from the sector indicates that securing time release to attend professional development is still a major barrier, compounded by the difficulty of

finding staff to cover absences. Lack of support from management for professional learning can also be a barrier in some services, with many services yet to recognise ongoing professional learning as an integral part of early childhood professionals' work. There are also limitations in the training opportunities available, with the scarcity of qualified staff available for delivering formal qualifications also translating to a limited number of quality professional development providers operating in the sector.

Some groups within the early childhood workforce face additional barriers in accessing quality professional learning. Aboriginal early childhood professionals have particular difficulty in finding suitable replacement staff with the cultural competence required to work effectively with Aboriginal children and families. Additional barriers also exist for casual and agency-based educators, who do not necessarily have regular places of employment through which to access professional learning opportunities and support. Family day carers, who are typically self-employed, face similar barriers in being unable to access professional learning through an employing organisation, and can also face considerable costs in lost income if they take time off for study or professional learning.

All stakeholders have a role to play in overcoming these barriers. In relation to the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education and the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care the role and responsibilities of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments is formalised.

As shown above, the Victorian Government has also played an active role in direct provision of professional learning, as well as assistance for employers with backfill costs, to support the sector to engage with current reforms. The Commonwealth also contributes through the Professional Support Program for approved child care services. DEECD envisages that there will remain a role for government but it may shift from provision to facilitation, including mapping professional learning opportunities against quality frameworks, disseminating information and filling gaps in research.

However, there is also a need to establish a culture of ongoing professional learning that is owned and sustained by the early childhood workforce itself. This will require willingness on the part of employers to invest in staff development, and to build expectations for ongoing professional learning into job design. It will also require willingness on the part of early childhood professionals to assume responsibility for their own ongoing learning and professional growth.

The NQF will assist with developing this culture, by embedding staff development within the formal expectations and accountabilities for all licensed services. Proposed arrangements for the registration of early childhood teachers will set out the responsibilities for professional learning for all teachers, which may then flow on to clarification of professional learning requirements for other early childhood staff. For OSHC professionals, opportunities exist to improve integration with school colleagues to support a culture of quality ongoing professional learning. The sector must also continue to develop formal and informal mentoring, coaching and networking initiatives, to grow and share knowledge and skills between professionals themselves.

Conclusion

As the submission shows, understandings of efficiency and effectiveness for the early childhood workforce are undergoing a period of significant change. Growing awareness of the importance of the early years has generated a renewed emphasis on quality practice across all early childhood services and professional disciplines. This is perhaps most notable for child care services that have grown out of a productivity imperative to increase parental workforce participation, but which are now better understood as having potential to make a significant difference to child and family outcomes, and have an enduring impact on lifelong learning and development. However all early childhood disciplines are confronting the challenge of thinking about practice in new ways to lift service quality across the sector.

This has generated a shift in emphasis on skills for the early childhood workforce, and raised expectations for the qualification levels and professionalism of early childhood educators and others involved in early childhood development. It is now increasingly recognised that the skills and knowledge of early childhood professionals can make a significant difference to outcomes for children and families, and that workforce qualifications are a crucial element of the quality of the services they provide. It has also provided an impetus for greater collaboration between the full range of professionals who support the learning and development of young children in the critical period from birth to eight years of age.

In terms of efficiency for the sector, one of the most significant changes has been the increased integration of early childhood education and care, and better alignment of early childhood education programs with long day care services. This has considerable productivity gains both in supporting the provision of services that meet the needs of working families, and in increasing access to a quality early childhood education program for all children, including those in long day care. At the same time, the integration of two sectors that have grown out of different needs, philosophies and business models has created some complexity and inefficiency as different funding models and industrial arrangements are brought together. It has also created substantial demand for qualified workers beyond what can be met by the current pool of qualified educators.

The Victorian Government is already taking action to meet these challenges for the early childhood workforce, as outlined in this submission. However, the submission has also identified several areas in which further work is required.

A significant step forward in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the early childhood workforce will be to develop a clear, evidence-based framework for workforce skills required at all levels, and how these should be developed. At present, the sector is transitioning towards a set of expectations that bring together the existing knowledge bases of early childhood education, care, health and development, as well as emerging knowledge and research. The EYLF and VEYLDF have made a significant contribution to establishing a shared language about practice, but more work is still required to deepen the level of engagement with these documents, unpack their practical implications in a variety of services and contexts, and to embed them into workforce training and professional development. Further areas for development include aligning practice expectations with the National Quality Framework, and clarifying professional roles, standards and practice for educators at all levels.

Another efficiency gain can be made through clarification and consolidation of professional development expectations for the early childhood workforce, to create a professional culture of continuous learning and improvement. There remain significant skill development needs for new and existing early childhood professionals, especially in responding to the diverse needs of children and families and supporting those at greatest risk. The consideration of the registration of early childhood teachers with the Victorian Institute of Teaching may provide an opportunity to explore more structured approaches to professional development. There is a need for further discussion between all stakeholders.

Finally there is an ongoing need to raise awareness more broadly of the importance of early childhood development and the need for skilled professionals in this area. This is necessary both to attract the requisite numbers of workers to the sector, and to ensure that the expectations of parents and other service users are high enough to drive and sustain the delivery of quality services. It is also necessary to ensure that the productivity gains of investment in effective early childhood services continue to be recognised by governments at all levels, and ensure a continued commitment to supporting and developing a workforce capable of delivering them.