

## Training in early childhood

This submission addresses the issue of 3 and 4 year university education of early childhood professionals, and the composition of those courses (ie birth to 5, birth to 8 and birth to 12 years).

We note with concern the growing number of 4-year university level degrees in education attempting to cover the age range birth to 12 years. Our understanding is that these are responding to market pressures. It makes sense for students to increase their employment prospects with a degree that qualifies them for employment in both the early childhood and primary sectors. Given de-regulation in the tertiary market coming in 2012, universities are particularly responsive to market forces in their attempts to maintain student numbers. This has been justified on the assumption that market-driven responsiveness is more effective and efficient, resulting, in the business world, in a better product (Vorhies, Harker, & Rao, 1999).

However, education institutions, whilst commonly perceived in more recent years as businesses delivering a service to consumers, do not operate in the same environment as those businesses selling products to consumers. Universities are required, by the government, to address issues such as social justice and inclusion in providing life opportunities to the full range of Australians. Even in the world of business, there is clear evidence that market-driven capitalism does not, and cannot, deliver social justice (Fridell, 2007). Universities also, cannot meet their social inclusion responsibilities if they are left to operate in a purely market-driven economy. In other words, the degrees students may WANT are not necessarily the degrees that will either position them for employment in the future or provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to advance Australia as a nation.

We see this as a particular issue in the shaping of early childhood degrees. A 4 year degree covering the age ranges birth to five or birth to eight (depending on which definition of early childhood is used) creates opportunities for students to be exposed to the unique nature of early childhood pedagogy and opportunities to consolidate their learning with extensive professional experience. In our experience (and team members have scrutinised a number of early childhood degrees over the years in a variety of roles including accreditation and professional recognition of qualifications) degrees that cover the range birth to twelve years present a number of concerns:

1. Accreditation requirements for primary teachers are prescriptive and inflexible. Because early childhood accreditation requirements are sometimes less prescriptive, they tend to be overwhelmed by the primary requirements. This often results in courses that have, for example, a focus on primary school children in 3 of the 4 years of the course. This is not an acceptable exposure to early childhood pedagogy.
2. Early childhood pedagogy is unique with its focus on principles of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; partnerships; high expectations and equity; respect for diversity; ongoing learning and reflective practice; and practice incorporating holistic approaches, responsiveness to children, learning through play, intentional teaching, learning environments, cultural competence, continuity of learning and transitions; and assessment for learning (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Combining this focus with that emphasised in the primary curriculum requires a sophisticated synthesis that takes time to develop. We do not believe that such a synthesis can occur in a 4 year degree, and certainly cannot occur when the two different approaches are not accorded equal weight
3. With the development of integrated early childhood services, there is potential for the early childhood profession to evolve in a way that takes the majority of the focus away from the classroom, into homes and community settings. Whilst there will always remain a need for early childhood classroom teachers, the underpinning training for this role may become part of a more holistic child and family approach upon which education (or indeed other

specialisations) are built. This further distances early childhood classroom teaching from a school focus and a birth to twelve degree.

In summary, we argue the need for clear guidance as to the desirable characteristics of the training needed to prepare people to work in early childhood. We believe accrediting bodies (supported by clear national policy directions and national standards) need to make decisions about how people train to be effective early childhood professionals and that training institutions need these guidelines in order resist the imposition of market-driven decision-making.

We recommend that:

- 3 and 4 year trained early childhood professionals need to have a qualification that exposed them to early childhood pedagogy throughout the duration of their course
- 3 and 4 year trained early childhood professionals need to have a qualification in which early childhood (and family) pedagogy consists of at least 50% of the entire course

In addition, we wish to express our concerns with draft recommendation 5.1 which proposes current educators/teachers with 3 year EC qualifications may continue to be educators of 'preschool programs' in preschools, kindergartens, child care centres. We are concerned that this will continue to position early childhood educators as holding lower status and professionalism in comparison to primary and secondary teachers. Given international recognition of the importance of the early childhood years (Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2010; Mustard, 2008; Penn, 2009; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2010), and the growing professionalization of early childhood, it seems a backward step to deliberately reduce the training requirements to a level below that of other teachers.

Therefore we recommend that:

- Three-year trained early childhood professionals must enrol in degrees to upgrade to 4 year qualifications by 2013 and show gradual progress year by year, with completion in about 4/5 years maximum.

- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Fridell, G. (2007). *Fair trade coffee: the prospects and pitfalls of market-driven social justice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Institute for a Competitive Workforce. (2010). *Why Business Should Support Early Childhood Education*. Washington DC: Institute for a Competitive Workforce, US Chamber of Commerce.
- Mustard, F. (2008). *Investing in the early years: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do*. Adelaide, SA: Government of South Australia.
- Penn, H. (2009). *Early Childhood Education and Care. Key lessons from research for policy makers*. Brussels: European Commission for Education and Culture.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2010). *Concept Paper. The World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Building the Wealth of Nations*. Geneva: United Nations.
- Vorhies, D., Harker, M., & Rao, C. (1999). The capabilities and performance advantages of market-driven firms. *European Journal of Marketing*, 33(11/12), 1171-1202.