



The International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry (IWFCI) welcomes the enquiry into the Australian childcare workforce and provides the following observations and comments.

Australian Working Patterns

The Australian economy more than ever before operates in a global trading environment. It has a dependency on export activity to contribute to investment and job creation. Business owners, employees and consumers are all affected by this environment in some shape or form.

Australian employees for example have the longest full-time working hours among 22 other OECD countries. The other countries with long hours of work include New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA). Australia is one of only a handful of countries in the OECD that has not placed a limit on working hours (Workplace Research Centre, The University of Sydney, Australia).

Small business is the largest employer of Australians. There are over 2 million small businesses in Australia largely focused on the agriculture, retail, hospitality and personal services sectors. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there are in excess of 585,000 small businesses run by women. Over 65% of small business owners work between 35-50 hours of week and during the start-up phases of a business the working week can be in excess of 70 hours a week.

The deregulation of trading hours in most states/territories has extended the trading hours of most small businesses to at least a 6 day a week; 10 hour a day operating environment.

Access to quality, reliable and affordable childcare is essential to workforce participation. Families need the choice of quality childcare provider and the location of service delivery (in-home; work-site, close to home/work place) to better balance their training, working and personal lives. Further, the current structures of childcare do not support workers, students and business owners working non-standard hours particularly in sectors such as retail, tourism, hospitality, aviation, agriculture, defense and medical/health care.

Provision of Childcare

Long day care is used by approximately 70% of recorded working parents to DEEWR's surveys. There are no equivalent figures recorded for in-home care such as nannies. Nannies attract a modest childcare rebate if they are registered, compared to long-day care and family day care schemes. Yet their responsibilities for learning, safety and care remain just as important. IWFCI encourages the Federal Government to also consider the accreditation, training and safety considerations of in-home nannies.



The 2004 census of child care services produced by the Federal Department of Families and Community Services reported that long day care centres opened for an average of 10 hours and 48 minutes per day, generally between 8am – 6pm. Of 3,812 long day care centres surveyed, only 21 opened on weekends and of these, 8 opened on both Saturday and Sunday. There were only 2 centres operating for 24 hours a day.

In summary, these structures do not support workers and employers working non-standard hours.

Childcare Profession

The workforce composition of the childcare sector is largely female in both teaching and administration roles. It's a workforce that has high staff turnover, which impacts on learning and the nurturing of children, as well as the morale and workload of other staff.

It's a sector that is poorly remunerated compared to other parts of the education and training industry, yet provides the most important foundations for a young person's life. The Australian childcare sector has suffered for too long with pay disparity with the school sector for no qualified reason. New Zealand has long had in place pay parity with the childcare and school sectors.

The qualification levels of staff in Australian child care centres are considerably lower than the standard teaching practice of many countries overseas. For example, Nordic countries require childcare staff to have a minimum Bachelor degree qualification in order to deliver early learning programs. The critical difference between the experience overseas and here is that Australia has one of the highest privatization arrangements of its childcare sector in the region. Foreign Governments in Europe for example largely fund and operate childcare centres.

The Australian childcare sector lacks diversity amongst its workforce by gender; age group and ethnicity. This doesn't create an optimum learning environment nor is it truly reflective of the diversity within the Australian community. Measures and interventions by government may be required to encourage greater participation by males for example.

Measures by the Federal Government to improve training are welcomed to help with the attraction and retention of quality professionals into the childcare industry. However quality training is not enough. Salaries and conditions must reflect the high levels of responsibility of teaching and nurturing children. In addition, access to quality facilities and modern teaching tools are critical to support best practice learning and development. Maintaining facilities and equipment should not be the sole domain of parenting committees to fundraise. Government and the industry must partner together and provide regular equipment grants so that teachers, assistants and learners have access to the best learning tools.



Early Childhood Curriculum

The recent efforts through COAG to nationalise the early childhood curriculum are a necessary start to build education standards and to assist with workforce mobility across the sector. It remains to Australia's disadvantage that the current curriculum does not provide for any foreign language learning, unlike in Europe and Asia that the mastery of up to 3 foreign languages is common-place in quality early childhood settings.

In the words of Australia's Prime Minister, "Australia is a trading nation. We live in a globalised economy". However the investment in foreign language skill acquisition is appalling low at all levels in the Australian education system and in the wider community. Yet Australia's security and trading future would well benefit from more foreign language acquisition by its citizens.

Business Structure of Australian Childcare Centres

The vast majority of childcare centres in Australia are small-to-medium enterprises; many of which are owned and managed by family-run businesses. It needs to be recognised by Government that regulation requirements need to be practical in their desire and application.

DEEWR's earlier grants to support the small business sector to introduce family-friendly measures into their workplaces were very welcomed. A continuation of these grants would help with the attraction and retention of staff to the childcare sector.

About IWFCI

Established in 1992, the International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry (IWFCI) is a not for profit, non government organisation. Its headquarters are in Melbourne, Australia with branches and affiliates in Singapore, USA, China, India and South Korea. It was the first chamber of commerce established in Australia dedicated to supporting the needs of women in business. IWFCI actively works with local and foreign governments in policy formation to support female entrepreneurship, and continues to be the leading Australian women's organisation in a range of international dialogues including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Further details can be found on its corporate website at: www.iwfc.org

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