

Supplementary Submission to Productivity Commission Draft Report:

Early Childhood Development Workforce

United Voice – The Childcare Union

9 September, 2011

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's attention towards the workforce in rural and remote services, Indigenous ECEC, and the inclusion and additional needs programs. In addition to our main submission, we offer comments reflecting anecdotal evidence collected from our membership which focus specifically on these areas.

1.1. Inclusion and additional needs workforce

United Voice agrees with the Productivity Commission's assessment of the Inclusion Support program and strongly supports recommendations 8.1 and 8.2 for greater investment and administrative simplification of the programs. It is imperative to ensure funding levels which are sufficient to attract qualified staff into these positions; it is a disservice to vulnerable children that workers in these roles are earning on average half the wage and experiencing inferior conditions of their colleagues in the ECEC sector.¹ We reinforce the Productivity Commission's observation that it is precisely those children who experience the greatest disadvantage or vulnerability who stand to gain the most from the highest levels of quality childcare. In light of this, educators in these important roles need to be adequately qualified, secure in their jobs and supported with professional wages.

United Voice has learnt that in some instances centres are rejecting children with special needs due to the additional expenses they incur. Many centres would like to employ staff members who are trained specifically to work with these children, however, find that doing so is financially unviable, especially given that there is already a gap between funding and the lowest award rate. There is a significant gap between the actual rate of pay for Inclusion Support workers (which is often the casual rate at a higher rate of pay) and the level of the subsidy. The burden therefore often falls on the existing staff in the service, who need to ensure that the basic needs of these children are met. In many cases the burn out rate of staff in these circumstances is very high. Children are often funded for fewer hours than the actual hours that they are in attendance at the centre and require the extra educator. As a result, centres end up paying the difference for this additional time. Centres should not be disadvantaged in any way for accepting and educating children with special needs.

If inclusion and support programs were to be properly resourced, existing ECEC services could be utilised very effectively to assist the community as a whole in working with children with special needs. In particular, this would assist families whose children may not be eligible to receive funding at specialist schools yet are in need of integration. Turning these children away due to lack of

¹ Productivity Commission (2011), *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Draft Report, Melbourne, p. 215

funding only ensures greater costs in the future when these children reach school age without the support and prior education that they require.

1.2. Rural and Remote ECEC

United Voice supports the Productivity Commission's assessment of difficulties in recruiting and retaining the rural and remote ECEC workforce. As the draft report notes, workforce issues in rural and remote areas reflect broader problems of low pay and workforce retention in the ECEC sector as a whole.

Targeted initiatives to attract and retain the ECEC workforce in rural and remote areas are necessary. United Voice shares the Productivity Commission's concern that current incentive schemes geared towards attracting the workforce by means of urban to rural migration may not be the most appropriate or cost-effective, particularly given that workforce shortages are also present in urban areas. We believe that the most desirable solutions would involve recruiting and training workers from within local communities themselves, and we support the Productivity Commission's recommendation that such alternative strategies should be investigated (recommendation 9.1).

United Voice also supports recommendation 9.2 for government to provide access to housing for all ECEC workers at reasonable cost in order to attract and retain sufficient staff in remote areas. However, we strongly caution that if such a measure is primarily oriented towards attracting ECEC workers from outside the local community, it is likely to conflict or counteract any alternative strategies to recruit and train local a workforce from within rural and remote communities. United Voice members in rural and remote areas report that current housing schemes primarily benefit outsiders, and this can lead to resentment amongst locally recruited workers who already live in the community and are therefore ineligible to receive similar housing benefits. A situation of structural inequity can therefore develop, alienating the existing local workforce in favour of mostly urban workers from outside the community. This may create further disincentives for local residents to enter or remain within the ECEC workforce. A program to provide access to housing for all ECEC workers should therefore avoid exacerbating these conditions. It should complement, rather than conflict with, alternative strategies aimed at attracting and retaining local workers in ECEC and be framed within the context of a broader rural and remote workforce strategy (for instance, equivalent or comparable compensation could be offered to locally recruited workers).

Finally, we note that although particular initiatives are needed in order to attract and retain workers in rural and remote areas, such targeted initiatives will in themselves not be sufficient; targeted measures need to be backed by a sector-wide solution focussed on increasing the wages of ECEC educators.

1.3. Indigenous ECEC services

United Voice strongly supports the Productivity Commission's call for Indigenous-focussed ECEC services to be brought into the scope of the National Quality Standard, and for them to be adequately resourced and funded in order to achieve these goals (recommendations 14.1 and 14.3).

We note that the integrated services model, particularly Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, have a capacity to pursue innovative and holistic community service models if such programs were to be adequately resourced.

United Voice supports the need for local communities to be involved in ECEC provision and planning, and for ECEC services to be, where possible, locally managed and owned.

United Voice understands that many Indigenous-focussed ECEC services, particularly in remote areas, currently employ a significant proportion, and sometime the majority, of their workforce through the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program. Although the program's purpose is to provide greater employment opportunities to Indigenous people, United Voice has received reports that the levels of remuneration received under the program are inadequate. As a consequence, Indigenous ECEC workers tend to be underpaid in comparison to the ECEC workforce as a whole, and Indigenous-focussed services tend to suffer from even higher turnover and a lack of stability in staffing compared to mainstream services. Funding should be directed to ECEC workers employed under the CDEP program to ensure that they are adequately remunerated and not disadvantaged in comparison to non-Indigenous workers who are employed within the same roles. Additional funding should also be extended to allow for conversion of CDEP placements into permanent positions.

"People just want a fair go, to get a job, to get the same amount of money that others are getting, and to make a contribution to their communities."

- Veronica John, project officer, Indigenous Professional Support Unit.

United Voice supports recommendation 14.4 calling for governments to develop coordinated workforce strategies to build the Indigenous ECEC workforce. The development of such workforce strategies, however, should occur in collaboration with local communities and with sensitivity to local needs. Successful mentoring programs have been established in the Northern Territory, in which local councils have been involved in pairing centre directors with respected community leaders. This has allowed services to develop programs in a manner which gives ownership and empowerment to their communities and allows for the creation of job opportunities through the recruitment of staff.

United Voice understands that training programs for staff in Indigenous-focussed ECEC are not always adequate, since mainstream training programs tend to reflect the needs for staff in mainstream services. United Voice supports recommendation 14.8 for greater resourcing of Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSU) to deliver professional development to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff working in Indigenous-focussed ECEC services. We note that policy-makers could also draw on the expertise of IPSU to assist with developing an accurate assessment of where existing training programs can be found, and where current unmet needs may exist.

As the Productivity Commission notes, facilitating adequate workforce training presents particular difficulties in the context of remote Indigenous communities. Greater resourcing should be extended toward student-centred design principles (recommendation 14.6) as part of a range of options to support adequate workforce training. In addition to this, however, United Voice has been advised

that a program of exchanges or secondments could function as an effective workforce training strategy. If such a program was facilitated between staff employed in Indigenous-focussed services in remote locations and staff employed in urban settings, it could satisfy a number of aims: facilitating greater skill and knowledge sharing across diverse service types and locations, supporting improved cultural competency for non-Indigenous ECEC staff, and giving Indigenous workers from remote communities an opportunity to access training programs which are only available in urban locations. Finally, while some ECEC services have also introduced technological innovations to facilitate training in remote areas through distance education, there is a concern that such initiatives are not adequately supported through access to telecommunications infrastructure, technological support and maintenance services.