



66 Albion St, Surry Hills 2010
phone: (02) 9212 3244
fax: (02) 9281 9645
network@netoosh.org.au

Response to Productivity Commission Draft Report

Into Early Childhood Development Workforce

**Prepared by
Network of Community Activities
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About Network

Network of Community Activities represents 1000 OSHC Services in NSW and ACT. Approximately 700 of those Out of School Hours Services (OSHC) in NSW services and ACT, are current financial members of the organization and we remain an active and credible voice in the field of school age care in Australia

Established in 1974, Network provides resource, support, training, advocacy and advice to communities and OSHC services throughout NSW.

Introduction

Networks response supports the submission from the National Out of School Hours Services Association (NOSHSA). As the member for NOSHSA in NSW, our response serves to highlight some specific issues from our NSW Association that we wish to draw to the attention of the Productivity Commission. Our submission focuses purely on Out of School Hours Services and does not address issues related to early childhood education and care services from other sectors.

Overview of Response To Report.

Perceptions of OSHC.

We believe the report does not do justice to the OSHC sector in NSW and that further work is required to ensure the issues and challenges facing the sector are accurately captured. We are conscious that there is a general lack of research and information on OSHC that is available for the Productivity Commission to access and this was the major reason for such a gap on reporting.

Network reiterates the concerns expressed by NOSHSA in the recommendations referring to OSHC as “non-cognitive”. Whilst the term is known and used by some researchers we find it misleading and should not be used in context of this discussion. We support and maintain OSHC is “free time” and based on play, it should not be interpreted that this is non cognitive. There is a large amount of research on middle childhood that would indicate that the nature of children’s play is cognitive and has long-term implications for children’s development. The OSHC sector is a champion for children’s play in Australia in a time when we increasingly see children’s free time for play becoming more structured and robbing children of the important role play has in all aspects of their healthy development. Play is essential for the development of resilient children and acknowledged as a fundamental human right ¹

We reiterate NOSHSA’s point that the footnote attributed to Robyn Monro Miller on page 110 with use of the term “non cognitive” is not accurate. Ms. Monro Miller was reiterating the differences between school age care and early childhood in her conversations with the Productivity Commission. At no time was this discussion of service provision based on children’s play and leisure identified as not contributing towards a child’s cognitive development.

OSHC Staff Qualifications, Pay and Conditions

The report does not address the shortage of educators in OSHC that are currently being faced by services, nor the significant differences in pay and conditions between OSHC services and other early childhood professionals.

The rate of pay remains considerably low and we have had our members advertise repeatedly to find suitable staff. However the nature of work is primarily part time and the award does not cover a provision for staff to be paid planning or administration time. The result is that staff may generally be reliant on an empathetic management that understands the nature of the work and preparation required.

¹ Article 31 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Network believes that the transient nature of the OSHC workforce can also have strength in providing for children access to community members and their range of talents and skills. For children of school age this exposure to a variety of talented and creative people can enhance their development and provide them with a range of role models drawn from different disciplines. However the success of a transient workforce is based on a primary workforce made up of skilled pedagogical leaders. Without the ability to earn a full time living wage sustaining this primary skilled workforce is severely challenged. In NSW 60% of our staff are qualified however we also rely heavily a casual workforce made up of tertiary students, freelance artists, sportspeople and actors.

Network does not support the Productivity Commission proposal that there be no qualification requirement in OSHC, however likewise we do not support the thinking that there be a mandatory qualification for all staff. There is a lack of research to identify the level and scope of qualifications; however anecdotally we see that quality services generally draw on a range of staff from a diverse range of backgrounds. The report does not make reference to current existing qualifications for OSHC that are implemented in other states and territories. Certificate IV Children's Services (Outside school hours care) and Diploma of Children's Services (Outside school hours care) were developed as a result of the OSHC sector calling for relevant and appropriate qualifications following their lack of satisfaction with qualifications that prepared them for work in early childhood services but not for OSHC. In the last review and update of the Community Services Training Package in 2008 there was an extremely strong lobby from both OSHC and early childhood for separate qualifications that support children in their middle years.

We believe that services should have a skilled leader that has qualifications appropriate and relevant to working with a 5-12 year age group and the local community in a play and leisure setting. This leadership would then be supported by a multidisciplinary team of individuals who contribute to children's understanding of their community and share the diversity of skills that they bring to the centre.

Network is opposed to current calls for a minimum mandatory Certificate III qualification for all staff as the qualification is aimed at working with 0-5 year olds and lacks relevance for the OSHC sector. This is age-range is stipulated in the national Training Package and was not considered a relevant middle years qualification by both the national Industry Reference Group or the Steering Committee in the 2008 review. In addition we believe that there is no evidence to suggest that in OSHC service provision qualifications at such a low level contribute to enhanced service provision for children.

Certificate III is also not considered in the Australian Qualifications Framework to be sufficient level of qualification for a person to be left in charge of a service. If we are to ensure that qualifications are meaningful and contribute to quality this should mean that the qualification is appropriate for the sector.

Network believes that the implementation of a mandatory qualification for all staff is unmanageable and unable to be sustained within the OSHC sector in NSW. Ultimately the imposition of a mandatory qualification could result in the driving down of quality than raising it. We caution against a system that has staff employed for their qualification rather than their ability to relate to children and create positive environments where they can spend their leisure hours. Our 35 years of experience tells us that school age children will vote with their feet when unhappy with their OSHC service. Therefore much reliance is placed on educators having a high level of emotional intelligence and an ability to engage with children's interests for viable service provision. Sadly such skills are not always a precursor for gaining a qualification.

We believe the report does not unpack the challenges of the OSHC workforce in meeting these needs or the strength that is reflected in the current workforce and it's ability to maintain a high standard of provision. This includes the fact that services are run out of non purpose built venues or shared spaces and staff are continually challenged with adapting spaces for the children or being faced with uncertainty of venue due to the low status of OSHC services in some schools.

Our Quality Assurance results indicate that despite the adversity of poor pay and conditions and limited access to suitable venues the sector has continued to thrive attracting a band of dedicated educators committed to children and quality play provision. However, this cannot be maintained without the Government looking at a workforce development strategy for OSHC as we move into a new era with the National Quality Framework.

Specific NSW Comments on draft recommendation.

Draft recommendation 3.6

- Regulators should have mandatory qualifications, reference to "adequate resourcing" is not comprehensive enough nor does it address the necessary skills sets.
- Regulators must have qualifications in children's services or they are unable to be seen as credible in the eyes of educators administering a service.

Draft recommendation 8.1 / 8.2 / 8.3

There is support for the contents of recommendation 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 with the following comments;

- NSW OSHC services are reaching crisis point in meeting service provision for children with high support and complex needs. Network has recently put in a submission to the NSW Government on this matter. In particular we have identified the absence of services for 13-18 year old children is resulting in OSHC services for 5-12 year olds absorbing these children in circumstances that are

- unrealistic and not in the best interests of children or educators.
- There is a lack of training and insufficient funding to provide adequate support to OSHC staff for the management of children with high and complex needs and this is placing OSHC educators at risk of burn out or injury.

Draft recommendation 9.1

- Network has successfully implemented scholarships and travel subsidy to assist our rural and remote services access conferences and weekend training. These two initiatives funded by State and Federal Governments have been extremely successful in increasing access to professional development.

Draft Recommendation 10.1

- There is a plethora of registered training organisations offering qualifications fast tracked however there appear ongoing concerns with the quality of these qualifications and this requires special attention.
- In OSHC educators have undertaken qualifications that at times are not relevant to the provision. The result of the introduction of a Certificate IV in Children's Services (Outside school hours care) and a Diploma of Children's Services (Outside school hours care) has lifted substantially participation rates in qualifications and increased the level of satisfaction of educators.
- Network has had our members report a high level of dissatisfaction with courses that cover 0-12 years, as they believe that the course often focuses more on the early years than the middle years.

Conclusion

We look forward to seeing a revised report that adequately captures the challenges of the OSHC workforce and makes recommendations that promote the development of a strategy for further research into the sector and the development of a workforce development strategy that includes industrial reform.

END

**For Further Information.
Robyn Monro Miller, Executive Officer
Network of Community Activities
66 Albion Street Surry Hills NSW 2010
9212 3244**