



**RESPONSE TO THE  
2013 PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY  
INTO CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD  
LEARNING DRAFT REPORT**

**SUBMISSION BY UNITED VOICE**



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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's draft report for the *Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*. There are a number of recommendations in the report that United Voice believes will strengthen the sector, including the reform of the funding and subsidy system, and the requirement that all services receiving government funding should be regulated under the NQF. However, United Voice has a number of concerns with the proposed recommendations. These concerns are detailed in our recommendations for changes to the draft report.

United Voice recognises that in formulating its recommendations for the sector, the Productivity Commission has to address both workforce participation and child development issues. United Voice believes that whether considering workforce participation and child development, the rights of the child should be foremost. This belief is central to our recommendations for amendments and additions to the reform proposals included in the draft report.

**Recommendation 1: Recognise that early education is important for all children.** Early education is not just about the year before school. High quality early education has benefits for even very young children. Early education involves individualised, developmentally appropriate, play-based learning programmes and requires qualified educators and teachers to develop, deliver, and evaluate these programmes.

**Recommendation 2: Maintain the qualification and ratio requirements established through the NQF.** United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's support for the NQF, and the decision to tie government subsidies to NQF accreditation. However, we are concerned about a number of recommendations to water down the ratio and qualification requirements, and in particular, those recommendations that affect children under 3.

**Recommendation 3: Any cost-based model must include professional wages** and other key costs in the calculation of the 'deemed cost' of providing ECEC services. In principle, United Voice supports the implementation of a means-tested, cost-driven model. However, this model must take into account the range of fixed and variable costs that are necessary for *quality* ECEC provision, to ensure that families are not worse off. In particular, this model must recognise professional wages as an intrinsic cost, as they are necessary to attracting and retaining staff in the sector, and ensuring a stable, professional workforce able to provide *high quality* ECEC services for the benefit of children, their families, and the community.

## 2. ABOUT UNITED VOICE

United Voice, the Early Childhood Education and Care union represents childcare directors and educators across Australia. We have members in every state and territory working in both large organisations and smaller centres. Together we are committed to providing the best possible early education experience for Australian children. United Voice Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) members have been engaged in every stage of the development, implementation and review of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and have direct experience on a day to day basis and at all levels of its impact on the practice of providing quality ECEC to Australian children.

### **3. THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND CARE FOR ALL CHILDREN**

Early learnings and adaptations are critical because learning and development are cumulative, with later development and learning building upon earlier development, with the result that the gaps between those doing well and those not doing well progressively widen.<sup>i</sup>

This quote illustrates the importance of high quality ECEC in the early years including for under-threes as detailed in a research review for the UK government.<sup>ii</sup> United Voice is concerned that the Productivity Commission believes that younger children do not require 'early education', and specifically, their proposal that 'ECEC for children aged birth to three should focus on quality care and not be required to include a significant educational component'.<sup>iii</sup> This fails to note that high quality interactions, in the pre-school years, including 0-3, are critical for longer-term development.<sup>iv</sup>

United Voice is concerned, however, that a number of the recommendations in the report will result in a divide between 'early education' and 'care', with early education framed predominantly as a preschool programme and assisting a child's transition to school, and childcare the domain of children under three. United Voice believes that this will be a step backward, and goes against a body of evidence that shows that all children, even in the years 0-3, benefit from a quality early education program. United Voice notes that the UK government has recently extended free part-time ECEC to children from the 40% most disadvantaged families from age 2 years, recognising the benefits that such early learning can bring. This decision was based on research evidence from the EPPE study.<sup>v</sup>

The ECEC systems that deliver the best short, medium, and long-term benefits are systems in which 'education' and 'care' is integrated, and delivered to all children in the years before schooling.<sup>vi</sup> In these programmes, 'early education' is not understood solely as facilitating a child's 'transition to school'. Instead, 'early education' is understood as learning through play to assist children to meet or exceed relevant developmental milestones. Key to the success of these systems is their use of developmentally appropriate play-based programs that are targeted to the specific developmental needs of each child.

#### **3.1. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FROM BIRTH TO THREE**

United Voice is concerned that the Productivity Commission believes that younger children do not require 'early education' programmes, and specifically, their proposal that 'ECEC for children aged birth to three should focus on quality care and not be required to include a significant educational component'.<sup>vii</sup>

The Productivity Commission has argued that the research demonstrating the importance of an educational programme for very young children is inconsistent. However, it is necessary to take into account the differences in ECEC provision and regulation in assessing these results. In assessing the research regarding the medium- and long-term effects of ECEC programmes for very young children, it is necessary to take into account the specific qualification and ratio requirements that underpin a given system, whether the system delivers universal or targeted programmes (or a mixture of both), the pedagogical underpinnings of the system, and the level of funding provided to families to access a given system.

When these aspects are taken into account, the research clearly demonstrates that there are positive benefits from specialised educational programmes for children under three, especially when delivered by suitably qualified staff with specialised knowledge in infant and toddler development and pedagogy.<sup>viii</sup> These benefits have short and long term benefits, which endure over time. However, it is important to note that these benefits only accrue in high quality settings; poor quality settings are shown to have negative effects.<sup>ix</sup>

The NQF reforms drew on this research in their development of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), with the aim of developing an integrated system that provided quality, developmentally appropriate, early learning experiences for all young children under 5, regardless of whether they were babies, toddlers or pre-schoolers.

### **3.2. THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR BIRTH TO THREE**

Effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and the provision of instructive learning and play environments and routines. The most highly qualified staff provided the most direct teaching but also the kind of interactions which guide but do not dominate children's thinking. Adults and children in the excellent settings were more likely to engage at times in 'sustained shared thinking' episodes in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend narratives.<sup>x</sup>

One of the key principles of early childhood pedagogy is 'learning through play'.<sup>xi</sup> According to the EYLF, play-based learning refers to 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations'.<sup>xii</sup> High quality, structured play-based learning experiences have significant intellectual, social and cognitive benefits, including:

- Well-developed memory skill
- Language development
- Behaviour regulation
- Enhanced school adjustment
- Improved academic learning in later life.<sup>xiii</sup>

High quality play-based learning experiences require contexts that are engaging, responsive and stimulating, as well as the active engagement of suitably qualified adults in providing those learning contexts.<sup>xiv</sup>

The EYLF was developed alongside the National Quality Framework, and was intended as a framework that would support educators and Early Childhood Teachers in developing individualised, play-based programmes that 'extend and enrich children's learning from **birth to five years** and through the transition to school'.<sup>xv</sup> The framework guides educators in linking developmental theory and pedagogical practice to develop individualised curriculum to support children in meeting or exceeding the relevant developmental milestones. It also provides educators with the support to identify when children are struggling to meet appropriate developmental milestones, and to work with families and community services to receive additional support.

The Framework is structured in relation to five key outcomes:

- Children have a strong sense of identity.
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world.
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.
- Children are confident and involved learners.
- Children are effective communicators.

Each of these outcomes is in turn related to the developmental outcomes of each age group, including children under three. Examples of developmental outcomes and pedagogical activities for very young children are listed in the table below:

	DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES	ACTIVITIES + EDUCATOR/TEACHER INTERACTIONS
PHYSICAL	Fine motor skills, gross motor skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For babies: tummy time to increase neck strength</li> <li>• For toddlers: Waking aids and push toys to assist with balance and walking development</li> <li>• Applying risk and challenge to physical activities, children develop an awareness of safety in relation to themselves and other children around them, e.g. obstacle course with different height levels and directions</li> <li>• Drawing, writing, painting, feeding oneself, to assist with developing hand eye coordination and fine motor hand control</li> </ul>
SOCIAL	Secure attachments, how to interact with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small group play, individual play, facial expressions, imitation games</li> <li>• Allowing children's interactions to happen without taking over but supervising including both positive and negative interactions</li> <li>• Providing smaller activity areas encouraging children to share and communicate with each other</li> </ul>
EMOTIONAL	Emotional resilience, agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a safe space where children feel they are acknowledged and heard.</li> <li>• Calm area where children can lay, read and relax</li> <li>• Providing structured and unstructured art and craft activities</li> </ul>
COGNITIVE	Problem solving, pattern recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Playing with blocks and shapes - shape sorters help to facilitate development of thought processes (what goes where, why does that piece not fit)</li> </ul>
LANGUAGE	Vocabulary development, conversation styles, emergent sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading aloud, songs, conversations, rhyme, repetition</li> </ul>

## **4. QUALITY MATTERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK**

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's recognition of the importance of the NQF, and their decision to link government subsidies to accreditation under the framework. United Voice members actively lobbied for the introduction of the NQF, and see these reforms as integral to ensuring a *high quality* ECEC sector.

We are concerned, however, about a number of recommendations in the draft report that pertain to ratios and qualification requirements. We believe that these recommendations will significantly water down the framework, and will have a substantial effect on quality, particularly for children under the age of three.

### **4.1. RATIOS**

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's decision to maintain the current timeline for the implementation of the national educator-to-child ratios. Research shows that educator-to-child ratios are a key element in the provision of high quality education and care. Higher educator-to-child ratios improve quality by giving staff more time to engage with individual children and providing possibilities for spontaneous interactions with children. These interactions are the basis of effective play-based early years education. Without these interactions, services struggle to achieve more than child-minding.

Higher educator-to-child ratios also ensure the health and safety of children in ECEC. In early 2014, United Voice conducted a survey of 1559 educators to determine their perspectives of the qualification, ratio and curriculum requirements implemented as part of the NQF.<sup>xvi</sup> 27% of those surveyed stated that prior to the implementation of the NQF they had witnessed a serious incident involving a child that was due to poor educator-to-child ratios. Common incidents included:

- Children being injured/having accidents and fighting (biting) because of inadequate supervision
- Children leaving the supervised area without the knowledge of the educators
- Staff giving children the wrong medication
- Children being left behind when the group of children are moved into other areas.
- Delays in toileting children or providing comfort in moments of distress.

#### **Survey Respondents said:**

I looked after 15 3-4 year olds on my own under the 1:15 ratio and there are many incidents. One person can just not deal with 2 situations at one time. It makes supervision of the room and bathroom hard or dealing with toileting accidents while not embarrassing the child by changing them in the room so you can watch others.

A boy was picked up in the afternoon and his mum seen a cut on his head, no one had seen anything happen and the child hadn't cried or told staff he hurt himself or been hurt at all.

***Ratios must be maintained at all times not averaged across a day or week***

It goes back to where we used to be, I think, too, in a centre that I used to run, where we would have the owner/director say, "Well, I'm here, so you'll be fine." No, we weren't fine. I had 30 three to five-year-olds who I had to try - and have rests, outside, inside. It goes back to where things used to be - it's so black and white now, you know what you have to do and you do it. You give that grey and there are going to be providers that will just run well below ratio, children's safety will be compromised. I really believe that. (Kristy Wilkie, Director, United Voice Productivity Commission Hearing)

The minimum ratios legislated through the NOF were ascertained through extensive consultation with the sector, drawing on extensive research into children's developmental needs and how to ensure quality outcomes for children. For this reason, United Voice is concerned about the recommendation that 'governments should allow services to temporarily operate with staffing levels below required ratios, such as by maintaining staffing levels on average (over a day or week), rather than at all times'.<sup>xvii</sup>

Under this recommendation, long day care services will be able to operate at double the legislated ratios (one educator for eight babies, one educator for 16 toddlers, or one educator for 22 preschoolers) for unspecified periods of time, provided they are over ratio at other times. United Voice members expressed a number of key concerns regarding the proposal to allow for average ratios across the day or week, including:

- **Compliance issues:** It would be difficult for a regulator to audit whether the centre has met average ratios across the week, as spot checks could not be used to determine compliance. Unscrupulous providers may take advantage of this leeway to operate constantly out of ratio.
- **Parental trust and reduced workforce participation:** Parents will not know from day to day, hour to hour if their child is at ratio or not. They will become upset and stressed if they find out that their child has been left in an under ratio room, while other children at the service are being cared for at ratio. Research shows that if parents do not trust that their child is receiving adequate education and care, they will reduce their hours of work or remove themselves from work altogether.<sup>xviii</sup>
- **Disruption to routines:** Routines will need to be adapted to lower staffing levels. Young children, and particularly babies, become stressed and unsettled with changes to routine. Stress levels have an impact on children's social and cognitive development.<sup>xix</sup>
- **Inability to implement educational program:** At poorer ratios, more time is spent completing tasks such as toileting and feeding. This leaves less time for spontaneous interaction between educators and children, which is the basis of an effective play-based early years education. This will have significant implications for children's social and cognitive development. Children who are developmentally vulnerable will not receive adequate attention to support them in reaching their relevant developmental milestones. Educators also note that it will not only be the learning of children who are developmentally vulnerable that will be affected. When under ratio the children that are causing problems or have developmental needs will get all the attention; developmentally advanced children

who require targeted programmes to extend their learning will not receive the dedicated attention that they require.

- **Poor hygiene:** Toileting and feeding children is difficult at higher ratios. It will be difficult for educators to ensure that children follow correct hygiene procedures (washing hands, etc.) when operating at the poorer ratios.
- **Difficulties responding to emergencies and incidents:** educators in rooms with poor ratios report a decreased ability to respond to incidents in the room. This includes accidents and injuries, children biting or harassing other children, toileting and vomiting mishaps. Incidents can escalate quite quickly, particularly with very young children.
- **Increased workforce stress and disputes:** In addition to the higher levels of stress caused by working at poorer educator-to-child ratios, this recommendation has the potential to increase stress in the workplace, due to educators having to negotiate with their employer about how ratios are averaged (which rooms are affected, which staff members are over ratio and for how long). As discussed below, this will have implications for turnover.
- **Evacuations: in rooms with poor ratios** it will be difficult to evacuate the building in an emergency situation. This will significantly compromise the safety of children and staff in a centre.

As these concerns demonstrate, this recommendation will severely compromise quality in centres, with significant implications for children's learning and development, child and educator safety, as well as parental trust in the ECEC system. It will also lead to increased educator stress, increasing the potential for burnout and greater turnover in the sector.

The recommendation to average ratios does not only have immediate and short-term impacts.

### ***Alternative strategies to maintain educator-to-child ratios in emergency situations***

United Voice surveyed educators to determine alternative strategies that services use to maintain educator-to-child ratios in emergency situations. Strategies which are already utilised by services include:

- Maintain a pool of casual educators that know the service and the families and can slip into the learning spaces easily.
- There is already a provision for an educator to be out of the room for 30 minutes with no backfill. This is used to deal with unexpected occurrences.
- Cooks are asked to hold a Certificate III so that they can work in a contact role, if required in an emergency
- Educators work earlier and/or later and get time in lieu or over time.
- Programming gets postponed until the next available day.

Finally, United Voice argues that if these strategies are difficult to implement due to a lack of qualified staff in the sector, then this should not be an excuse to water down the NQF requirements. Instead, solutions must be found to address the difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified staff in the sector. This includes providing professional wages and possibilities for career progression, and are discussed in detail in **Section 5**.

***Unqualified staff should not be included in ratio during their three-month probationary period***

United Voice is also concerned about the final part of **draft recommendation 7.5** which states that ‘the New South Wales and South Australian governments should allow a three month probationary hiring period in which unqualified staff may be included in staff ratios before beginning a qualification.’

This amendment was introduced in June 2014. In our submission to the Woolcott Review of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for ECEC, United Voice noted that our educators and directors had explicitly cited concern over these amendments. Specifically, they believed that although there should remain opportunities for individuals to gain experience in an ECEC setting prior to beginning their qualification, they did not believe that unqualified staff should be counted towards educator-to-child ratios. They noted that unqualified and inexperienced staff will lack the necessary skills to provide active supervision and implement play-based programs as required under the EYLF. They may also lack the necessary training in first aid, asthma and anaphylaxis. Educators also report that because of the higher level of supervision unqualified staff requires to ensure compliance and child safety, the presence of an unqualified staff member can actually result in increased workload and decreased one-on-one time for children. This has implications for the quality and safety of ECEC provision at a service.

For these reasons United Voice supports the NSW and SA governments’ decision not to adopt the amendment.

***States operating above the NQF requirements should maintain their current standards***

The Productivity Commission states that ‘a nationally consistent system should not leave scope for some jurisdictions to enforce requirements that exceed those taken to be acceptable in other jurisdictions’.<sup>xx</sup>

United Voice believes that where states were already operating above the NQF requirements, these requirements should be maintained. As Fenech et al note, the:

... staffing requirements stipulated in the NQS only modestly reflect research that clearly demonstrates the value added benefit of teacher qualifications to the provision of quality early childhood education and optimal developmental outcomes for children.<sup>xxi</sup>

The National Quality Framework was intended to establish a nationally consistent base line of ratios and qualifications. Given the dramatically different ratio and qualification requirements that were in place prior to the implementation of the NQF, the legislated requirements were intended to allow those states with significantly lower standards to develop the capacity and resources to transition to higher quality standards.<sup>xxii</sup>

## 4.2. QUALIFICATIONS

The collaboration and networking that goes on on a daily basis, as the educators learn not just from each other but also from the children, is inspiring. An example of this was late last week, when I was walking through our toddler room, which is two-to-three years old, and I noticed a child struggling to reach a block which was just out of reach; he was jumping up and down trying to reach the block. I noticed one of my Certificate III-trained educators get up to go and intervene. A diploma-qualified educator stopped her by touching her arm and they watched together. Another two children had now joined him and they were chatting about how to retrieve the block. One of the children pushed a stool over. He was still unable to reach it. While he was climbing off the stool, the little girl ran outside and she came back with a spade from the sandpit and gave it to the boy and he used this to flick the block off the shelf and get it down. They celebrated their accomplishment together and then went their separate ways.

If the Certificate III educator had gone over and just given the block to him, when she initially saw the event unfold, this whole process would have been missed. My diploma educator recognised this and she, in turn, helped the Certificate III educator understand the importance of time and space and giving children the opportunity to develop the type of skills they had just witnessed, on their own.

**This, to me, is a perfect example of why educators need to be suitably qualified, to not only educate the children but to educate each other, through professional development and daily reflection.**

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's acknowledgement that the research shows that 'staff qualifications are the aspect of quality that have been found to have the most substantial effect on children's development outcomes'.<sup>xxiii</sup> United Voice members strongly supported the introduction of increased qualification requirements through the NQF. Since the introduction of these requirements, educators across the sector have directly experienced the positive impact of the NQF reforms on minimum qualifications. The United Voice *Quality Matters* survey found that 90% of respondents had relevant ECEC qualification, with the remaining educators 'working towards' a relevant qualification. 53% of those surveyed had gained their qualification in the last 2 years or were currently working towards their qualification.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Significantly, 74% of those educators who had completed their qualification in the last two years believed that their qualification had improved their practice as an educator. A similar proportion believed that repealing the qualification requirements would negatively impact on the quality of care in centres. The survey also found that gaining a qualification increased the likelihood of educators remaining in the sector.

These results reflect roundtable discussions with educators and directors that United Voice conducted with members in December 2013 to understand educators' and directors' experience of the NQF and EYLF. There was general agreement amongst educators that qualifications improved the quality of ECEC provision.

Our survey found that a significant proportion of educators have experienced serious incidents in their current or previous centres as a result of poor qualifications. These include:

- not being able to identify children with special needs;
- inappropriate discipline;
- not appropriately dealing with allergies.

They also note that inadequately trained educators require the supervision of qualified educators, which reduces their attention away from children.<sup>xxv</sup>

Given these results, we are concerned about **draft recommendation 7.2**, which states that:

- All educators working with children aged birth to 36 months only be required to hold at least a Certificate III, or equivalent;
- The number of children for which an early childhood teacher must be employed is assessed on the basis of the number of children in a service aged over 36 months.

United Voice believes that this recommendation represents a significant watering down of the NQF requirements, and does not recognise the unique and necessary role that each of the qualifications play in the operation of a centre. The removal of the requirement for diploma and bachelor qualified staff members for children under three will undermine the spirit of an integrated ECEC system, and does not acknowledge that children under three require developmentally appropriate educational programmes.

The removal of the diploma qualification undermines the significant time and money expended by educators and their centres to obtain those qualifications. Under the proposed cost-driven model, there will be a disincentive for centres to hire these more highly qualified staff as they come at an additional cost. The cost of these more highly qualified staff will be passed on to parents unless they are retained in the NQF and calculated in the deemed hourly rate for ECEC service provision. This will be particularly onerous for parents at those centres who have already undertaken substantial investment to comply with the 2016 and 2020 NQF requirements ahead of time.

### ***The role of Certificate III and Diploma qualified staff in an ECEC service.***

The Certificate III trains educators to work in a support role within a centre. The course develops specific competencies including the ability to:

- *Support* behaviour of children and young people
- *Support* holistic development of children in early childhood
- *Provide experiences* to support children's play and learning
- *Participate* effectively in the work environment

By comparison, the Diploma qualification trains educators to undertake a leadership and mentoring role in the centre. Extending the work done in the Certificate III, the diploma trains educators to:

- *Foster* the holistic development of children in early childhood
- *Establish and implement plans* for developing cooperative behaviour
- *Provide leadership* in community services delivery
- *Identify and respond* to children and young people at risk.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The diploma qualification involves a greater breadth of knowledge, and links program and service planning to theories of development. This additional knowledge gives diploma-qualified staff the ability to produce individual, developmentally appropriate learning programs. These programs are not only designed to support children who are developmentally vulnerable to ensure that they don't fall behind, they may also be targeted towards advanced children to extend their learning while in care. It also gives them the developmental knowledge to, in collaboration with the ECTs, to identify children in need of early intervention, and in collaboration with the ECT and the child's family, identify services to provide additional support.

The additional knowledge gained through the diploma qualification is reflected in the specific role of diploma-qualified staff in a centre. A comparison of the sample job descriptions for Certificate III and diploma-qualified educators issued by the Childcare Community Cooperative NSW, shows that while Certificate III qualified staff are expected to be active team members, diploma qualified staff are expected to be *active team leaders*. Furthermore, in addition to the requirements for Certificate III educators, diploma qualified educators are also expected to be able to:

- Facilitate the implementation of contemporary research based practices at the service;
- Implement intentional teaching strategies;
- Be aware of funding available and the structure of support available to assist children with additional needs;
- Ensure the service is ready for operation at the beginning of each day;
- Act as a mentor and role model for other educators;
- Keep up to date with current developments in the early childhood education and care sector and engage in professional development opportunities.

For this reason, our members note that centres typically have diploma and bachelor qualified staff as room leaders and in charge of portfolios, child observations, and programme development. The Diploma qualified staff are also responsible for mentoring Certificate III educators, and exposing them to developmental literature through their programming.

Certificate III qualified educators provide a vital role in the provision of quality ECEC in these situations. However, the Certificate III does not qualify them to take on the added responsibilities (and associated liabilities) that are associated with the role of a diploma-qualified educator.

### ***The importance of ECTs for under 3s***

The bachelor qualified early childhood teacher has a very specific role within a centre, which goes beyond the delivery of preschool programmes. An early childhood bachelor qualification is a professional degree that provides graduates with a detailed knowledge of child and brain development from birth; knowledge of age appropriate pedagogical theory and practice; foundational management and leadership skills; and knowledge of how to work in partnership with families and communities to support children's learning.

This knowledge is used by the ECT to prepare, deliver and evaluate programmes targeted at the abilities of individual children, whether they are developmentally vulnerable and require additional support, or developmentally advanced and require extension.

In addition to their key role in developing programmes, an ECT:

- Is able to recognise and refer families to appropriate services when developmental concerns arise. This leads to better outcomes when identified earlier.
- Has an important role in mentoring and developing other staff members.
- Guides families and provide support and referral when and where needed. This also requires a good knowledge of the multiple services that are available to support families.
- Is expected to keep up to date with contemporary research in the field and know how to apply this research in practice. This knowledge is then communicated to other educators in the centre for use in their practice.

The role of the ECT is particularly important for children under three. As discussed in **Section 1**, the period from birth to three years is a critical period in a child's social and cognitive development. A detailed, theoretically informed educational programme is critical to children's development in this period. These programmes result in greater social and cognitive development, with long-lasting impacts, when they are of higher quality.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The research demonstrates that educational programmes are of higher quality and have greater long-term effects when they are developed with the oversight of a bachelor qualified teacher with specialised knowledge of infant-toddler development and pedagogy.<sup>xxviii</sup>

For these reasons, United Voice would ask the Commission to reconsider its recommendation that 'LDC services should be able to provide care for children under 36 months without the oversight of a teacher and these children should not be included in the count towards the requirement to hire an early childhood teacher (ECT)'.<sup>xxix</sup>

We note, furthermore, that calculating the number of ECTs on the basis of the number of children over three would mean that only very large centres would require an ECT for any age group. When taken together with the recommendation that the requirement for diploma qualified educators be removed, this could lead to a situation where only the director was required to hold a qualification above a Certificate III, with no other staff members with higher qualifications to provide mentoring or leadership in the centre.

***ECT qualifications must include practical experience for children aged birth to 24 months.***

United Voice is concerned about the recommendation to 'remove the requirement that persons with early childhood teacher qualifications must have practical experience for children aged birth to 24 months'.<sup>xxx</sup>

An emerging body of research demonstrates that the quality ECEC provision for infants and toddlers is improved when staff are qualified, and when their qualifications are tailored to include specialised content regarding infant-toddler development and pedagogy.<sup>xxxi</sup> Infants and toddlers require very different and specialised pedagogical styles to those employed with pre-schoolers, 'due to the different communication styles of infants and toddlers, and the increased physical care and emotional nurturing that they require'.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The research finds, furthermore, that to ensure high quality outcomes for all age groups, it is necessary to demonstrate how knowledge can be applied to support children's development. While a theoretical understanding of children's development is important, it is necessary to link this knowledge to pedagogical practices, and for students to gain experience of these practices in an early childhood setting.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

#### **4.3. REDUCING TURNOVER THROUGH THE NQF**

A stable professional workforce is critical to a *high quality* ECEC system. Factors which influence the high turnover of staff (low wages, lack of career progression) negatively impact on the quality of ECEC provision, as when there is high staff turnover:

- Children are less able to form stable relationships (secure attachment), which in turn affects their social and cognitive development;
- Children spend less time engaged in meaningful activities, as existing staff must direct their attention to familiarising new and relief staff with the routines and practices of the centre and the individual needs of children;
- Children become stressed and act out, leading to behaviour management issues and increased stress levels amongst staff and other children.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

There is also a correlation between high levels of turnover and children's vocabulary building skills.<sup>xxxv</sup>

This research was reflected in the responses to United Voice's 2014 *Quality Matters* survey. The survey found that **56% of centre directors had witnessed a child show signs of stress or distress due to high turnover of staff.**

Respondents describe a number of ways in which the stress due to staff turnover is manifested in children, including:

- crying and becoming inconsolable;
- not participating in activities;
- becoming withdrawn;
- not wanting to go to child care.

Furthermore, 62% of respondents believed staff turnover had impacted on their ability to engage meaningfully with children:

- The training of new staff members and familiarising them with each child's routine takes away from the time they can spend with each child.
- While new staff members are learning the particular procedures and routines of a centre, existing staff members must undertake a proportion of their work.
- Children will go to the staff members they recognise until they become familiar with new staff. This reduces those staff members' ability to engage individually with children.

**Survey respondents said:**

You cannot build positive relationships or meet individual needs if the staff is constantly changing. The remaining staff are so stressed trying to provide for everyone that a "bandaid" solution means they can only give tiny pockets of time which does not meet meaningful interactions.

Early childhood education is complex. Each time a new staff member commences in the team, the established team members have to carry the new one until they learn about the individual children's needs and learning styles. Also children take time to build relationships with the new team member.

[Turnover] creates too many challenges in the room. Relief staff are unfamiliar & untrained. [This causes] disruption to routines and the whole program. Educators feel stress and feel like they are always in "damage control" and feel extremely overwhelmed with the situation.

It was not just the children who were affected by high staff turnover. 59% of centre directors had parents who had express concern over levels of staff turnover.

**Survey respondents said:**

We have had parents unhappy to hand their children over to staff they don't know and had parents wait at the centre for familiar staff member.

Parents have commented that their child is unsettled, that they don't want to come to day care. They will look for familiar faces to leave their child with and some parents also become distressed with multiple staff changes.

A parent said, 'Oh I liked her where has she gone'. It was a bit hard to say she got a better paying job packing shelves at Coles, as when she was there she said she loved child care, it was her passion. But the dollar drives us all, we need to pay the bills.

The established links between low staff turnover and improved quality is significant to any discussion of what is reasonable turnover in the sector as compared to other industries. As Whitebrook and Sakai note:

While employers generally expect more turnover in low-wage industries, it is problematic to tolerate high turnover in a human services business such as a child care centre, where it has been associated with compromised development of children and lower quality services.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Turnover in ECEC is linked to job dissatisfaction and burnout, and can be traced to a number of factors including:

- Low wages;<sup>xxxvii</sup>
- Poor work conditions;<sup>xxxviii</sup>
- Lack of adequate training;<sup>xxxix</sup>
- Low professional status;<sup>xl</sup>
- Lack of opportunity for career progression.<sup>xli</sup>

The issue of wages and working conditions will be addressed in the following section. However, it is important to note that the qualification and ratio requirements implemented through the NOF may also alleviate staff turnover, by reducing staff stress levels and potential burnout.

### ***Reducing Turnover through the Qualification Requirements***

Citing evidence that providers struggle to fill positions for ECTs and diploma qualified educators, the Productivity Commission argued for the removal of the requirement for diploma qualifications and ECTs for under threes to 'alleviate staff shortages, by either increasing the potential pool of workers that satisfy regulatory requirements or reducing the number of staff that must be employed (or both)'.<sup>xlii</sup>

United Voice argues that while the removal of diploma and ECT qualifications may address current workforce shortages, it will do little to stabilise turnover across the sector in the long-term. This is because turnover in the sector is not solely attributable to wages; it is also exacerbated by a lack of career progression in the sector and the inadequate training of staff.

Adequate qualifications have the potential to reduce staff turnover as they:

- Reduce educator stress, by giving them the skills to manage an unpredictable work environment.
- Give educators skills to develop 'developmentally appropriate' activities for children, which means children are more likely to be settled and calm.
- Train educators in appropriate behaviour management strategies to manage complex learning environments.<sup>xliii</sup>

The indirect benefits for quality through the reduction of turnover are seen for all age groups, including very young children. A large volume of research consistently demonstrates that qualifications particularly improve the job satisfaction of educators working with children under two.<sup>xliv</sup>

Qualification requirements also reduce staff turnover by introducing greater possibilities for career progression.<sup>xlv</sup> Career progression is understood both in terms of an increase in opportunities and responsibilities through more advanced roles, and associated increases in wages to reflect the complexity of those roles. Currently, progression through the classification structure under the award is only possible through improvements in qualifications. Year based progression through the wage structure is exhausted after the 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

As argued in our original submission to the Inquiry, the ECEC sector has traditionally been marked by poor opportunities for career progression, with wages increasing only marginally with years of experience.

The requirement for 50% diploma qualified staff in contact roles introduced greater possibilities for career progression in the sector. The qualification gave staff access to higher grades of pay under the award, and an increase in responsibilities through becoming qualified to undertake a leadership and mentoring role.

Finally, United Voice argues that difficulties in attracting diploma and bachelor-qualified staff should not be used to justify the removal of the requirement for these qualifications. These requirements were developed through extensive consultation with the sector, and in response to substantial empirical research. Instead, it is necessary to introduce measures to attract and retain suitably qualified staff to the sector, such as increased wages that reflect the level of qualifications in the sector.

### ***Reducing Turnover through the Ratio Requirements***

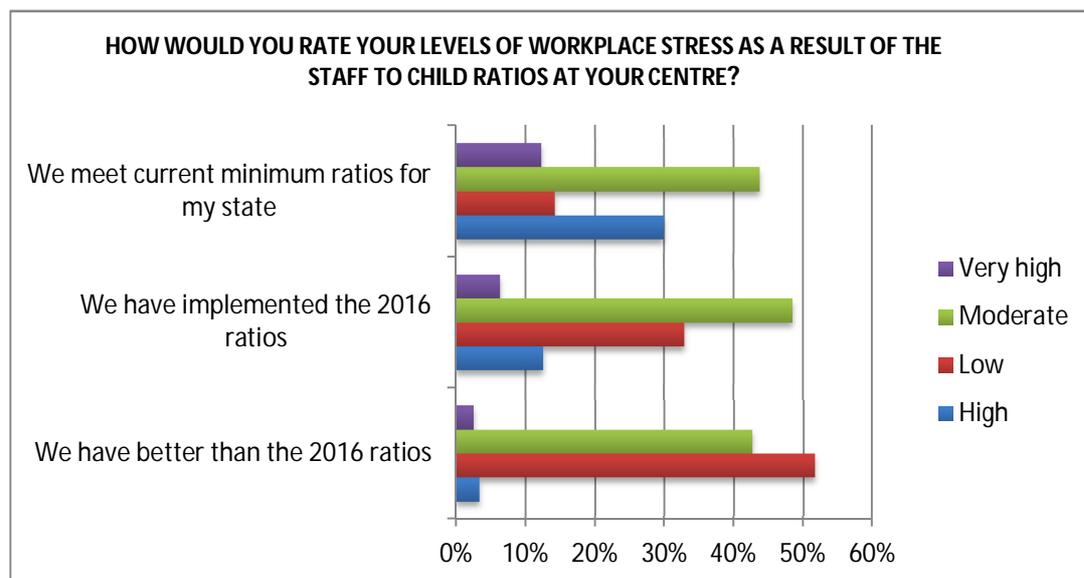
In addition to educators leaving the sector for other sectors with higher wages or improved working conditions, educators also:

... seek out positions or sites where small group sizes and lower staff-to-child ratios enable them to teach more effectively and support positive developmental outcomes for young children.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Improved ratios indirectly improve quality by lowering staff turnover, as a result of reduced staff stress levels and reducing burnout.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Survey respondents were asked what ratios were currently in place in their centres. **Over 20% of respondents work in centres operating at or above the 2016 ratios.**

The survey found educators working with better educator-to-child ratios experience less stress.



With all aspects of the NQF currently under review, educators were asked whether they would leave the sector if ratios were wound back to pre-NQF levels.

- **38% of those surveyed say they would leave the sector if ratios were wound back.** This increases to 51% of those who work in centres that are already operating above the 2016 ratios.

The most significant improvement in educator-to-child ratios is due to occur in Victoria in 2016, with the ratio for children older than 36 months improving from the current 1:15 to 1:11. In this State, almost a quarter of educators said they would leave the sector if the 2016 ratios were paused or not implemented.

These results stand as a warning against implementing the recommendation to average ratios out across the week. The ratios that could potentially be implemented through these recommendations are much higher than those that are currently in place, and will significantly increase staff stress levels. This will in turn increase burnout amongst centre staff, affecting turnover throughout the whole sector.

#### **4.4. REGULATING HOME-BASED CARE**

Our original submission to the Productivity Commission offered qualified support for the extension of government funding to new models of home-based care (including nannies). Drawing on the experience in New Zealand, we argued that:

- The extension of funding to nannies and additional home-based care options must ensure child development outcomes and not just workforce participation outcomes. In-home care must be regulated under the NQF and expected to implement the EYLF.
- Additional funding must be provided to the sector to meet the costs of the expanded system. Funding should not be removed from existing modes of care to fund the uncapping of in-home care provision.
- Educators must be contracted through a provider to ensure accountability for families and government, as well as workplace protections for workers.

We welcome the Productivity Commission's recommendation that any provision of government subsidies for nannies and other home-based care options should require their accreditation under the NQF. However, we still retain some significant concerns regarding the proposed model.

The Commission states that 'it should not be compulsory for nannies to be employed through an agency or existing childcare centre in order to be eligible for assistance'.<sup>xlviii</sup> United Voice strongly opposes the suggestion that families should be able to contract a nanny directly to receive government subsidies. United Voice has extensive experience with home-based care in the Aged and Disability Care sectors, where home-based care is exclusively managed through providers. Our experience in those sectors demonstrates that a provider-based model is necessary for achieving quality provision and reducing administrative burden for families, government and the home-based worker.

This is confirmed by the Commission, which notes there are a number of savings and efficiencies that can be gained from contracting nannies through an approved provider or agency.<sup>xlix</sup> A provider

model also ensures a higher quality of care and accountability, and ensures child development outcomes. Similar to family day care, under a provider model nannies would have access to higher qualified staff to assist them in curriculum development and programming.

United Voice do not support the adoption of a 'risk management' approach for home-based care as recommended by the Commission, as we believe that this would undermine the spirit of the NQF. There should be no distinction made in the regulatory requirements for diverse forms of home-based care. Nannies should be accredited and assessed similarly to Family Day Care.

In our original submission to the Inquiry, United Voice supported the adoption of a provider-based model similar to that already in place in New Zealand. Under that model individual educators are supported *and visited in their place of care* by a bachelor-qualified teacher who is responsible for up to 20 educators.

United Voice also notes that nannies are a more expensive and labour intensive form of ECEC provision. While the Productivity Commission draft report allows for nannies to operate with ratios similar to that of family day care, in many cases a nanny will only be responsible for the child or children of a single family. This is a significantly lower ratio than that offered by family day care, and well below the ratios offered in centre-based care. Given this, United Voice is concerned that the extension of subsidies to nannies has the potential to exacerbate existing workforce shortages in the sector, and furthermore, with the system as proposed offering uncapped places for nannies, may introduce significant additional burden on the budget. We believe that any extension of government subsidies to nannies and new forms of home-based care requires detailed modelling to determine the budgetary impacts of families transferring from centre to home-based care, as well as taking into account those families that already employ a nanny and will aim to have these nannies licensed under ACECQA.

The expansion of home-based ECEC services should not be used to fix structural problems with the current system. Other submissions to the inquiry have argued for the extension of government subsidies to nannies by highlighting the problems that families currently face in accessing ECEC services. Problems of access to centre-based care are due to chronic underfunding to the sector, and to a lack of planning to ensure that sufficient and suitable places are available when and where they are needed. These structural issues must be addressed. The issue of access should not be solved through recourse to a more expensive and more difficult to regulate form of ECEC.

## **5. FUNDING FOR QUALITY**

United Voice supports many of the recommendations to regarding the reform of the funding to the sector. However, we remain concerned that many of the reforms will leave families significantly worse off.

We note that the possible reforms have been constrained by the remit to deliver reforms within the current funding envelope, and we welcome the Productivity Commission's proposal to direct additional investment to the sector. However we note that the total recommended funding is still well below the recommended benchmarks set by the OECD as a requirement for the provision of a *high quality* ECEC system that can deliver child development as well as workforce participation outcomes.

### **5.1. A MEANS-TESTED PAYMENT**

United Voice supports the Productivity Commission's recommendation to 'combine the current Child Care Rebate, Childcare Benefit and the Jobs Education and Training Child Care fee to support a single child-based subsidy, to be known as the Early Care and Learning Subsidy (ECLS)'. United Voice believes that this will make funding more transparent for families, and easier to administer for services and government.

United Voice supports the 90:30 linear, tapered model that the Productivity Commission has identified as their preferred model for means-testing parental payments. United Voice believes that retaining a 30% universal base rate for high-income families emphasises that early education is important for all children. Furthermore, we believe that the universal base rate will encourage high-income families to keep their children in formal ECEC services, rather than utilising informal services that are not accredited through the NQF and which do not receive government funding. Although disadvantaged and vulnerable children stand to benefit the most from quality ECEC, research has shown that universal ECEC systems provide higher quality ECEC for all children than programmes targeted at these groups.<sup>i</sup>

United Voice is concerned by the Productivity Commission's recommendation that the subsidies include an activity test. United Voice believes that all children deserve access to quality ECEC services, regardless of their parents' employment status. While the Commission has been tasked with improving workforce participation, this goal should not be achieved at the expense of children.

### **5.2. A COST-BASED MODEL**

United Voice supports a cost-based funding model in principle, and welcomes the Productivity Commission's recognition of the need to include essential and variable costs in calculating an hourly rate for the cost of care.

However, United Voice notes the concerns of a number of providers that the Productivity Commission's current proposal does not identify significant variable costs, such as rent. If geographic differences are not included in the calculation of hourly rates, many families will be worse off under the proposed system due to a significant under-estimation of the cost of providing care.

United Voice would also like to emphasise that professional wages be understood as an intrinsic cost of providing *quality* ECEC services, and must be included in any calculation of cost of providing ECEC services.

### **5.3. PROFESSIONAL WAGES ARE AN INTRINSIC COST OF QUALITY ECEC**

United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's finding that wages in the in the sector are 'relatively low' (465), and that this has impacts on the ability of services to attract and retain staff, particularly Bachelor qualified teachers and Diploma qualified educators.<sup>ii</sup>

However, we are concerned by the finding that 'there do not appear to be any major regulatory or other barriers preventing services from offering over award wages and conditions' as 'services are not constrained by regulations in the fees they charge families and therefore in their ability to pass on higher labour costs'.<sup>iii</sup>

There is a large body of research that demonstrates that parents' take-up of ECEC services is responsive to the affordability of ECEC services. Families are shown to reduce the number of hours of care in response to cost increases, with lower income families unsurprisingly most responsive to fee increases.<sup>liii</sup> In other words, the families who stand to benefit most from quality ECEC are those families who are least able to meet increases in fees, and who are more likely to remove their children from care as fees increase.

Professional wages need to be addressed in order to stem the flow of experienced staff from the sector and attract new educators to fulfil the requirements under the NQF. There is a structural issue that we are seeking to address through the FWC. Educators are critical to the provision of early years education and care which is critical to workforce participation and childhood development. Paying educators professional wages is an intrinsic cost and must be treated as such in the funding model.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1: Recognise that early education is important for all children.** Early education is not just about the year before school. High quality early education has benefits for even very young children. Early education involves individualised, developmentally appropriate, play-based learning programmes and requires qualified educators and teachers to develop, deliver, and evaluate these programmes.

**Recommendation 2: Maintain the qualification and ratio requirements established through the NQF.** United Voice welcomes the Productivity Commission's support for the NQF, and the decision to tie government subsidies to NQF accreditation. However, we are concerned about a number of recommendations to water down the ratio and qualification requirements, and in particular, those recommendations that affect children under 3.

**Recommendation 3: Any cost-based model must include professional wages** and other key costs in the calculation of the 'deemed cost' of providing ECEC services. In principle, United Voice supports the implementation of a means-tested, cost-driven model. However, this model must take into account the range of fixed and variable costs that are necessary to *quality* ECEC provision, to ensure that families are not worse off. In particular, this model must recognise professional wages as an intrinsic cost, as they are necessary to attracting and retaining staff in the sector, and ensuring a stable, professional workforce able to provide *high quality* ECEC services for the benefit of children, their families, and the community.

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