

Introduction

Unprecedented political and community attention has been directed at Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia over the past 5 years. This has echoed similar situations in other regions and at an international level (CoRe, 2011), with particular focus given to the concept of 'quality' and what measures are deemed necessary to enhance the quality of service provision. In Australia this focus has been evident through the National Quality Framework agenda (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) which has operated with an underlying intent to increase service provision, raise quality and foster a culture of continuous improvement in the early childhood sector.

The Australian Catholic University, Faculty of Education and Arts supports a focus on the provision of high quality early education and care services to foster the learning experiences for young children. Our overall position on early childhood education and care (ECEC) identifies four key elements that need attention if this drive to increase high quality learning experiences for children is to be realised. The following overview of these elements provides the basis of the ACU Faculty of Education and Arts submission to the Commission:

- **children** - recognition of the diversity of children's lives, strengths and needs, and respect for children as citizens in their own right.
- **families and communities** - acknowledgement that partnerships and relationships between educators, families and communities are critical to support high quality learning and care for young children and that these connections need to be responsive to the diverse contexts of children, families and communities.
- **curriculum, pedagogy and assessment** - support for the place of well developed, teacher-supported, play-based learning, and the importance of content knowledge and assessment practices to underpin effective intentional teaching and learning in a play-based curriculum.
- **educators** - acceptance that a major determinant of the quality of early childhood education and care services is the staff providing those services and that provision of effective early learning is maximised when there is a highly qualified team of educators working to guide and support children's learning. A key component of such a team are university qualified early childhood teachers.

Response to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper: *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*

In this response to the PC Inquiry Issues Paper, ACU will focus on the influence of educators' qualifications on the quality of the service provided to support and guide young children's learning and development.

ACU supports the statement made by the Commission: "The main rationale for government involvement in ECEC is to enhance learning and development outcomes for children and to generate broader social and economic benefits ..." (p. 5).

ACU proposes the following as critical to the effective provision of ECEC services that "enhance learning and development outcomes for children":

- **A major determinant of the quality early childhood education and care services is the staff providing those services. A key factor that impacts on what level of support can be provided for children's learning and development is the qualifications held by educators and the capacity for educators to provide educational leadership.**
- **The introduction of a curriculum framework for the prior-to-school sector - Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) - has been supported by research and by practitioners as contributing to an increased focus on young children's learning in ECEC services. This, in turn, has contributed to an increased focus on the educational role of early childhood services, with particular focus on supporting young children's early learning.**
- It is well accepted that the first three - five years of life are the most crucial in terms of brain development and the importance of providing appropriate learning environments. International research indicates that high quality early learning provision requires well qualified staff who have appropriate initial qualifications and opportunities for effective ongoing professional learning (CoRe, 2011; European Commission, 2009, OECD, 2006). **ACU supports the notion that an effective early childhood team includes a range of qualifications. University qualified early childhood teachers and educators with other levels of qualifications are all required to ensure high quality early learning experiences (Thomas & Nuttall, 2014).**
- What is important to ensure children's learning is well supported is, not only the employment of university qualified early childhood teachers, but the assurance that the qualifications these teachers attain are appropriate and effective in the specialised provision of learning and teaching environments in the prior-to-school sector. "As the research results demonstrate, particular attention must be paid ...to the content and training methods used. Practical and theoretical training should be provided which prepares staff (teachers, educators etc.) for the demands of the profession and for the diverse tasks they must carry out. Work with young children requires staff to deploy a

range of skills. Professional staff have a mission to educate and to socialise children, ...The complexity of the job must also be taken into account” (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009 p.109). The authors of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] report (2006) argue that the provision of high quality education and care services for young children is dependent on at least some staff at each service holding appropriately targeted university level early childhood Teacher Education qualifications: “This is a challenging agenda for early childhood educators, requiring high educational standards, theoretical knowledge and regular professional development. (However),.... Working with diversity in particular milieus is a feature of ECEC professional work, to which traditional teacher training has responded insufficiently. In the future, practitioners will be required to play an enhanced role in developing social cohesion, for which new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical.” (p. 167). **ACU supports the argument that specialised early childhood teacher education programmes are required and ensures that the course/program content of our early childhood qualifications has a high level of focus on young children and the curriculum, pedagogical and leadership knowledge required to effectively support their learning.**

- To effectively respond to the complexity of leading the provision of early childhood learning and development educational programmes, the employment of well qualified staff who have skills, knowledge and expertise in both the theory and practice of early childhood learning is essential. “The education and training of staff is a fundamental issue for the quality of ECEC provision. It is one of the key factors which determine the successful integration of children from at risk groups.; most researchers agree that the training of adults/staff responsible for educational activities in ECEC should be at the bachelor level of higher education and should be specialised.” (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009 p. 109). **Provision of effective early learning is best supported when there is a highly qualified team of educators working to support children’s learning. Support for educators to build their knowledge and skills through effective and timely education/qualification pathways represents sound investment in current and future learning opportunities for young children and for society in general. ACU supports the enhanced provision of pathways for Diploma/Advanced Diploma qualified early childhood educators into degree level programmes.**
- **Professionalisation of the early childhood sector and professional recognition of early childhood educators is essential to ensure quality service provision and positive learning opportunities for all young children.** Australian based inquiry (Productivity Commission, 2011) and international work argues that to provide equitable access to services and to raise the quality of provision there is a need to support “ the professionalisation of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competencies, qualifications and working conditions” and to develop

“policies aimed at attracting, training and retaining suitably qualified staff” (Official Journal of the European Union, C 175/9). “The good training, good pay and good working conditions of staff and the support they are given are key factors for ensuring quality ECEC provision” (European Commission, 2009, p. 9). Particular consideration needs to be given to the challenging issue of high staff turnover and in particular the tendency for many university qualified teachers to move from the prior-to-school sector to the school sector if and when they are able (although it needs to be acknowledged that not all university qualified early childhood teachers make this choice). This trend may be fuelled by better pay and conditions for teachers employed in the school sector and it is an issue that needs to be addressed if the prior-to-school sector is to be staffed with high quality teachers.

Responses to specific questions and requests for advice

This submission responds to a number of questions and requests for advice presented through the Issues Paper. These are points we identify as relevant to the key focus of the ACU submission.

Point 1:

What role, if any, should the different levels of government play in childcare and early childhood education?

- *Ensuring that all Australian children have fair and equitable access to high quality ECEC services.*
- Maintaining the requirement that there is a university qualified educator in all ECEC centres and ensuring that this provision is supported through policy expectations and resourced through effective funding provision.
- Ensuring that university early childhood teacher education courses provide effective and comprehensive coverage of early childhood curriculum, pedagogy, and professional experience, and that these courses are informed by research-based theory and practical expertise.

Point 2

What outcomes from ECEC are desirable and should be made achievable over the next decade?

- Provision of high quality early learning and care services for all young children, that are responsive to and respectful of their diverse contexts and learning requirements.

- Increased number of university qualified early childhood teachers in all early childhood education and care centres.
- Increased and supported access to university qualifications that provide graduates with a comprehensive, broad and coherent early childhood focussed knowledge, skills and expertise.
- Stability in the early childhood workforce than maximises staff professional status and minimises staff turn-over in centres. This will be best supported through the provision of equitable pay and employment conditions that will both attract and retain the best qualified staff. This can only be achieved with adequate community and government financial support to enable an adequate supply of university qualified early childhood teachers who are attracted to and committed to working in the prior-to-school sector.
- Support and PD for service providers to ensure effective teams of diversely qualified staff work to deliver ECEC programs. Individuals working in such a team approach require support to engage in appropriate learning opportunities and to enhance their professional self esteem.
- Continuing commitment to raising community awareness of the significance of play, development and learning in the years birth to five for long term health and well being.
- Acknowledgement by the teacher registration authorities across the country of the particular expertise gained through early childhood pre-service teacher education programs and recognition of this qualification as eligible for teacher registration.

References:

CoRe (2011). *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (Final Report): A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture. CoRe Final Report*. University of East London, Cass School of Education and University of Ghent, Department for Social Welfare Studies.

Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *National quality framework for early childhood education and care and school age care*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Author.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra: DEEWR.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2006). *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*. <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>

Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009). *Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities through Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

European Commission, (2009). *Early childhood education and care: Lessons from research for policy makers* Retrieved 3.12.2013 from <http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports>

Thomas, L. M. & Nuttall, J. (2014) Negotiating policy-driven and state-mandated expectations of leadership: The discourses accessed by early childhood educators in Australia. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education Journal. Special Issue: Early Childhood Policy*. Volume 17, 2014, pp. 101 - 114

This submission was developed by Dr Louise Thomas, National Director of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, with support of Prof. Deborah Harcourt, Assoc. Prof. Suzy Edwards, Dr Sarah Heinrich, and Dr Cathie Harrison.