

Response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning: From School of Education, University of Wollongong

We commend the Productivity Commission on identifying a number of key reform issues including a focus on children with additional needs and children from at-risk communities including those from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds, however we believe that a focus on child outcomes has lost out to a focus on workforce productivity and perceived parenting needs. Social changes have challenged traditional views of childhood and child rearing including the move to shared care experiences, changes in family structure, increasing role of women in the workforce, and the role of education in young children's lives. The review of early childhood education and care is thus timely and needed. We applaud the goal of the commission in making early childhood education and care more accessible and affordable to parents however this must not occur at the expense of high quality early education. As a University our priority is to ensure we graduate high quality, capable and reflective practitioners who understand the unique needs of young children and their families, and to build a sustainable and engaged early childhood workforce. Our response therefore focuses on the importance of quality early childhood education and care and the importance of a highly qualified and skilled teaching profession.

1. Lack of understanding as to the key indicators of quality care

It is our view that recommendations by the Productivity Commission reflect a general misunderstanding about what constitutes high quality early childhood education and care and the benefits this has for child outcomes. Research conducted both in Australia and overseas (Bowes et al., 2009; EPPE, 2004, Vandell et al., 2010) highlights the importance of high quality early childhood education and care experiences for children's educational and socio-emotional development. These benefits have been identified both in terms of starting school as well as for long-term wellbeing. When examining quality early childhood education experiences researchers have differentiated between the structural and philosophical characteristics of the education and care setting. The quality of non-parental care is a multidimensional construct encompassing the physical environment, social policy, educational curriculum, staff qualifications, child-staff ratios, group sizes and interpersonal relations (Nielsen-Hewett & Coutts, 2009). To suggest that the National Quality Standards and elements should be reduced in any way neglects the right of Australian children to access best quality

education and care. Such a dilution of the research-based standards and elements within the National Quality framework would undermine the professional standards valued by early childhood teachers and would have little or no effect on access or affordability for families. In suggesting that lower qualified carers are adequate for children under the age of 3 years implies that high quality education is not valued or required for younger children. Further to this, the suggestion that ratios across all age groups could be increased, again sends the message that high quality education and care is not a focus of early childhood education and care initiatives within the Australian context. When it comes to quality early educational experiences, tertiary teacher education qualifications and teacher-child ratios matter and therefore should drive any reform measures and inform Government policy.

2. Separation of education and care of children

The education and care of young children are intuitively and intimately connected, any moves to separate these would be detrimental for children as well as the profession. Regardless of whether or not your child is 2 years of age or 4 years of age they should fall under a similar philosophical educational approach. All children have the right to a high quality educational experience regardless of age, gender or cultural context. There appears to be a misunderstanding that children under the age of 3 years only use early childhood education and care settings for 'care'. If the regulatory requirement for a degree-qualified teacher to educate children under three years of age were removed, not only would children in the most critical stage of their cognitive development be disadvantaged, but whole teams of educators would lose the benefits of the pedagogical leadership and critical insight that is most effectively provided by degree qualified teachers. If the numbers of degree qualified teachers in all service types and across all age groups is reduced, professional isolation and a reduction in collaborative and reflective practice, will limit the quality improvement process.

The recommendation to remove dedicated preschools from the scope of the National Quality Framework is a retrograde step and will reintroduce a divisive and confusing "education versus care" dichotomy between service types. We are also concerned that the recommendation to lower teacher ratio requirements for preschool aged children in NSW to that required by other states will not only reduce the number of teachers required in NSW, but will increase workloads and create stressful environments that are not conducive to children's optimal education and care. Rather than reduce the number and type of services in scope for the

NQF, it is necessary to unite the early childhood education and care sector by bringing more service types within scope. Over time it is our belief that this will support the professionalism of a united early childhood education and care sector and develop a system of high quality service provision that will benefit children, families and the wider community in social, educational and economic terms for generations to come.

3. The true value of teacher education

Early Childhood Education and Care staff qualifications reflect a recognised level and type of knowledge, skills and competencies that professional staff have received (OECD, 2012). There is international consensus that well-educated, university trained teachers are the key factor in providing high-quality early childhood education and care with the most positive cognitive and social outcomes for children of ALL ages (OECD, 2006; 2012). University qualified teachers, due to their depth of study, have greater capacity to respond to children's social signals, promote cognitive development, engage effectively with families and communities, and respond to the unique requirements of children from diverse backgrounds. University qualified teachers are better placed to engage in pedagogical leadership and the mentoring of less qualified staff which can only benefit the profession in both the short- and long-term.

Nobody would suggest that children in the early stages of primary school education would do well under the tutelage of less qualified teachers therefore why in the most critical years of a child's development would we say a less qualified educator could adequately plan for and optimise children's critical early learning. While it is uniform practice for all teachers in schools to hold a degree qualification this same standard has not extended to the prior-to-school context despite the fact that there is overwhelming evidence to show the significance of the first 5 years as an optimal period for child development and growth. There is very strong evidence that enriched learning environments and high quality pedagogy are fostered by better qualified staff, with better quality pedagogy leading to better developmental outcomes for children (Elliott, 2006; Litjens & Taguma, 2010). Findings from the well-known EPPE study indicate that high quality early childhood education continues to reap rewards in terms of literacy and numeracy well into the high school years. A most significant finding indicates that 18 months enrolment in a high quality university qualified teacher led early childhood educational setting is equivalent to the same level of growth achieved after 6 years in primary education. In terms of productivity, the best social, educational and economic return on investment is gained in by investing in the earliest years of a child's educational journey. Not having highly qualified

university trained teachers means children will miss out on this opportunity for growth and development, cheating children of their potential.

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