



Access and Affordability in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Productivity Commission's ECEC Public Inquiry May, 2023

The expertise of Curtin University's Early Childhood Education and Policy research groups informs this submission. The aim is to highlight for the Productivity Commission the current challenges and opportunities associated with increasing the accessibility and affordability of early childhood services in Western Australia.

Key Recommendations

1. The Australian Government should develop clear guidelines that enable the expedited conversion of educators from Diploma to Bachelor qualifications, facilitated through enhanced articulation agreements.
2. The Australian Government should allocate funding to universities to facilitate the provision of affordable and accessible professional learning opportunities for ECEC educators
3. The Australian Government should fund university-based pedagogical leadership research programs that work directly with and support remote and regional services
4. A 15% sector-wide salary rise in recognition of the increased workload of staff and anticipated demand for Long Day Care services
5. Equal pay for early childhood teachers working in long day care services and preschool/school environments

Overview

High quality early childhood education programs provide a 13% per child return on investment for those aged from birth to five years (Garcia et al., 2016). In view of this, we believe the Australian Government must increase its support for university-based ECEC programs and all ECEC sector staff in order to maximise these economic benefits and improve the overall sustainability of the sector. The anticipated increase in the percentage of parents returning to the workforce in the coming years and the subsequent rise in demand for ECEC services points to an urgent need for reform. We begin by noting that the Productivity Commission's inquiry into ECEC is currently considering the utility of a national universal model and 90% Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate for parents/care givers. These two measures have our support because as Cross et al. (2022) point out, every Australian child and their family have a right to quality early childhood education and care, regardless of where they live, and we believe these reforms are an important step in this direction.

This submission highlights three areas of ECEC that require urgent attention and action. These measures are essential to deliver high-quality services and ensure they are accessible and affordable: *Educator Retention Strategies, Professionalisation of Early Childhood Educators, and Targeted Support Initiatives for Services.*

Educator Retention Strategies

The commission must prioritise the recruitment and retention of ECEC educators to ensure the sustainability of the Australian early childhood sector. The recent statistics concerning these two priorities are alarming. For example, in October 2022, there were 6,800 early childhood educator jobs advertised in Australia. For the 2022 calendar year, there was a 40% increase in advertisements for early childhood educator positions. In the same year, there was a staff turnover rate of 45% in regional areas and 30% in metropolitan from January to December (Rogers et al., 2022). While we welcome the universal model with a 90% CCS contribution as it enables increased affordability and accessibility for many Australian families, the commission needs to note that this initiative has the potential to worsen the ongoing and chronic staffing shortages across the sector, drawing

policymakers' focus away from the importance of staff retention.

The cost of living was a key focus of the Australian Federal Government's 2023-24 budget. With this in mind, we point the commission to a comparison of the pay rates outlined within the Children's Services Award (for employees within the children's services and early childhood education sector) and the Educational Services (Teachers) Award. This shows that early childhood teachers working in a long day care (LDC) service are subjected to a 4% pay reduction, compared to those in a preschool or school environment, despite having the same teaching qualification (Australian Government: Fair Work, 2010; Australian Government: Fair Work, 2020). The consequence of this is that there is a financial penalty for teachers working in a LDC setting. This is despite the fact they spend additional hours working face-to-face with children, frequently work overtime due to ratio requirements, and work continuously with children across school holiday periods, and more.

Recommended Educator Retention Strategies

We recommend, therefore, that early childhood teachers in LDC services are paid, at least equally to that of an early childhood teacher in a school setting. This is particularly important as the Children's Services Award was first introduced in 2010 with increased expectations set out within National Quality Framework and Early Years Learning Framework. At the time of implementation, there was no pay rise connected to the new approved learning and quality frameworks despite the added demands on ECEC educators. This must change to ensure the Children's Services Award accurately remunerates educators for the quality provisions they are expected to undertake. More broadly, the Australian Government should also consider undertaking a 15% sector-wide salary increase, in line with what has been awarded to the aged care sector.

We regard these two pay increase measures as an overdue recognition of the work that ECEC teachers and children's services employees undertake in LDC services. Upon implementation, they will support the attraction and retention of educators in these vital early learning contexts and contribute to the overall sustainability of the sector. In view of the

predicted increased demand for LDC as a direct result of enhanced affordability, in addition to the existing staff challenges outlined, the sooner these policy reforms are put into practice the better.

The Professionalisation of Early Childhood Educators

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) reported in February 2023 that 16.4% of LDC services nationwide had received waivers¹ because they were unable to appoint a suitably qualified early childhood teacher to meet mandated requirements. In Western Australia, the situation was even more concerning, with 24.1% of services holding waivers, the second highest in Australia (Roberts, 2023).

Recommended Actions to Support the Professionalisation of Early Childhood Educators

In response, we recommended that the Commission consider ways the Australian Government can work closely with universities, ACECQA, and teacher registration boards to identify opportunities for enhanced articulation agreements. In doing so, this coalition should focus on supporting educator conversion from a Diploma of ECEC to a Bachelor of early childhood education in an efficient and timely manner.

The Australian Government should also explore funding opportunities to support universities to host and deliver additional professional learning opportunities for educators that are accessible and affordable. For example, the Government could provide resources to support and expand Curtin University's innovative, practical, and research-based ECEC workshops delivered through its Professional Learning Hub. The aim of which is to build and facilitate better educational outcomes for the community by positively influencing individuals not only in ECEC settings but across the education system. The delivery of more high-quality programs and professional learning opportunities by universities in our view will result in families and care givers seeing an increase in both the standard of practices and equitable access to quality services in early childhood education.

¹ Waivers allow providers to maintain their level of service to families while dealing with exceptional circumstances. They should be applied for only as a last resort.

Targeted Support Initiatives for Services

Too many remote and regional Western Australian children and families do not have equitable access to high quality LDC services compared to their metropolitan counterparts (Cross et al., 2022). Analysis of the Western Australian service registers, conducted by Cross et al., (2022) supports this point. All Australian ECEC services regularly undergo assessment and rating by the Regulatory Authorities against the Seven Quality Areas outlined within the National Quality Framework. Through this process, each service is awarded a quality rating based on the following 5 step continuum (ACECQA, n.d.):

1. Significant Improvement Required
2. Working Towards National Quality Standard
3. Meeting National Quality Standard
4. Exceeding National Quality Standard
5. Excellent

While it is good news that no services at the time of writing fall into category one, *Significant Improvement Required*, Western Australia continues to have elevated percentages of *Working Towards* ratings in Quality Areas One: Educational Programs and Practices (17%) and Seven: Governance and Leadership (15%) (Cross et al., 2022). Breaking these statistics down further shows that services in remote and regional areas of Western Australia are of greatest concern as they hold the largest number of *Working Towards* ratings across the state: 22% in Quality Area One and 23% in Quality Area Seven (Cross et al., 2022). Looking at individual regions, 50% of services in the Pilbara and 43% in the Kimberley regions are *Working Towards*. A correlation between Quality Areas One and Seven has been noted in the Western Australian LDC sector (Cross et al., 2022), indicating the power of leadership to impact the quality of educational programs and practices delivered.

Recommended Targeted Support Initiatives for Services

In view of these challenges, we recommend that the Australian Government develop targeted support initiatives that foster leadership capabilities of educators working in LDC services, which focus on shared approaches to leadership within a model that emphasises the leadership

associated with the role of the educational leader (Cross et al., 2022). The Australian Government could also consider funding university research programs at Curtin University and elsewhere, that focus on National Quality Areas One and Seven and work directly with remote and regional services to drive pedagogical leadership and enhance quality outcomes exhibited across educational programs and practices and governance and leadership.

References

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Resources

Curtin University's Professional Learning Hub:
<https://www.curtin.edu.au/study/professional-development/professional-learning-hub-for-educators/>

Authors



Emma Cross
School of Education
Curtin University, Perth



Dr Matthew Sinclair
School of Education
Curtin University, Perth

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