



# The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education & Care

Submission from the  
Centre for Research in  
Early Childhood Education,

Macquarie School of Education,  
Faculty of Arts

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## About the Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education (CRECE) brings together a critical mass of early childhood education researchers from Macquarie University who work together with the early childhood community to co-design and conduct innovative, impactful research. CRECE is part of Macquarie School of Education which is ranked 93rd in the world for Education, according to Times Higher Education rankings, and ranked as Australia's leading Early Childhood Education institution by The Australian in 2022.

### Overview

We thank the Australian Government, via the Productivity Commission, for undertaking this inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

We value the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's considerations for recommendations that will support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC, that supports children's learning and development and reduces barriers to workforce participation.

As a group of early childhood researchers, we have drawn on both Australian and international research literature to identify some of the major current issues facing the provision of ECEC in Australia, and to provide the Commission with suggestions for ways forward.

We welcome questions and further discussion about any of the points raised.

We provide a summary of recommendations below, followed by a more detailed discussion.

### Summary Recommendations

1. Access to high-quality ECEC supports children's learning, development and wellbeing – especially those facing marginalisation, disadvantage and vulnerability – and should be **framed primarily as a child led entitlement**.
2. There is strong evidence that it is the quality of ECEC that matters. Initiatives that focus on increasing attendance without an assurance of high quality runs the risk of being detrimental to children's learning. It is essential, therefore, that Australia **maintains the integrity of its world leading National Quality Framework**.
3. To be effective, attendance in ECE must be of sufficient duration. There is compelling evidence that the longer children attend high quality ECE, either by starting earlier or by attending more frequently, and the more regularly they attend, the greater are the gains. Therefore, **attention must be paid to optimising children's regular and on-going attendance**. Little is known, however, about the 'optimal' dosage of ECE, or what threshold is required to accrue gains; or what type of attendance pattern is the

most beneficial. There is a lack of Australian evidence about the link between 'dosage' and outcomes. Therefore, **Australian research is required that addresses questions related to attendance and outcomes.**

4. A move towards universal access in the preschool years runs the risk of creating and reinforcing disadvantage at age three, rather than at school age. We strongly argue, therefore, that any focus on preparation for school in the pre-school years must **take into account the right of infants and toddlers**, and their families, to high quality ECEC, with a particular focus on **increasing the qualification requirements for those working with children under three**. Moreover, **attention is required to the impact of quality on infants' and toddlers' educational outcomes.**
5. Children's access to ECEC is negatively impacted by remoteness and socio-economic status. These challenges particularly effect the participation of Aboriginal children\*. To increase children's and families' participation in regional and remote areas, and low socio-economic areas, the **strategies needed to address these challenges must be targeted to the ECEC service's specific location**. It is critical, therefore, that there is **engagement and collaboration with local communities** in relation to the types of support they may require.
6. ECEC is part of the care economy. There are requirements to ensure that services operate productively - balancing quality and cost. However, traditional ideas for increasing productivity are inappropriate for the care economy. **New ideas** (theories) and understandings (research) **about what constitutes 'productivity' in ECEC are required to inform policy.**
7. The complex work of providing high quality ECEC that supports all children, their families and communities, and meets national policy objectives, is predicated on a workforce – teachers, educators and leaders - with specialised skills, knowledge and understandings, and who are well. The current workforce crisis threatens this quality lever. Supporting the workforce requires: **attention to, and investment in, initial teacher / educator education; a focus on interprofessional practice; working in partnership with diverse families; access to on-going professional development; opportunities for mentoring; the provision of safe adult workplaces; access to clinical supervision; and decent pay and work conditions.**
8. Existing research literature and National survey data have identified that ECEC educators' and teachers' wages and employment conditions form a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECE workforce. We therefore recommend that **workplace relations reform and associated financial and workplace supports be put in place to address historical pay and condition inequities**. State and Territory-based initiatives may focus on reform to parts rather

than the whole ECEC workforce operating in their jurisdiction. We recommend that this Productivity Commission report be considered alongside the findings and recommendations of the Pay and Conditions research project (Degotardi et al., underway), to **facilitate a coordinated National approach to workplace relations reform and associated financial and workforce supports.**

9. A recent review of the activity test has shown that it has a negative impact on i) workforce participation and ii) effective and equitable provision. We therefore strongly recommend the **removal of the current activity test for subsidised access to ECEC.**

\*We recognise the particular strengths of, and challenges facing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities, but as researchers who are not working specifically with these populations we do not provide recommendations for this group.

## 1. Access to High-Quality Supports Children’s Learning, Development and Wellbeing – especially those facing marginalisation, disadvantage and vulnerability

**Recommendation 1:** Whilst acknowledging the role of ECEC in supporting family workforce participation, access to universal high-quality ECEC supports the learning, development and well-being of children – especially those facing marginalisation, and therefore should primarily be framed as a **child led entitlement**.

The provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a major international policy issue (Kulic et al. 2019), as shown by international policy reports of OESO, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the European Union (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. [OECD], 2017). Investment in early education is considered a way of contributing to nations’ economic prosperity, promoting equity and ameliorating disadvantage, contributing to human rights objectives, addressing global poverty, and as a way of contributing to global sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Kulic et al, 2019).

However, we argue that access to ECEC should primarily be a child led entitlement. The role of high-quality early childhood education in supporting young children’s growth and development is now well established and widely understood. Decades of international research, including large-scale evaluations of programs *targeted* for disadvantaged children (e.g. Head Start, Abecedarian and High/Scope Perry Preschool programs), and universal access to pre-school (e.g. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project [EPPSE]), provides compelling evidence that attendance at high-quality ECEC services can have long-lasting positive effects on children’s social and emotional, self-regulation and behavioural, problem solving and mathematic, language and literacy, and physical development, and on school readiness (see for example: Kulic et al., 2019; Melhuish et al. 2015; Taggart et al, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Zaslow et al., 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that attendance in high quality ECE has the strongest benefits for children experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage (Melhuish, et al., 2015; Taggart et al., 2015).

Given the benefits of ECEC for children, access to ECEC is considered a child’s right in international agreements. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 28 states, that children have a right to education. Further, General Comment 7 specifically urges State Parties to provide comprehensive policies for early childhood – including education (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Similarly, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 target is that by 2030 “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education” (United Nations, 2023).

It is this international evidence base and policy context that is the driver for systems reform in Australia. In particular, the policy directive to increase access to early childhood education to all children in the one or two years before school. While we applaud the move to increase access to ECEC, we raise three issues:

*1.1. A focus on attendance without an assurance of high quality runs the risk of being detrimental to children's learning.*

**Recommendation 2:** There is strong evidence that it is the quality of ECEC that matters. Initiatives that focus on increasing attendance without an assurance of high quality runs the risk of being detrimental to children's learning. It is essential, therefore, that Australia **maintains the integrity of its world leading National Quality Framework.**

Much of the research identifying benefits of ECEC are from *targeted* programs which are generally of high-quality. Evidence of the consequences of expanding *universal* ECE is limited and mixed (Felfe & Lalive, 2018, p.33). One major reason for these equivocal findings is inconsistency in the quality of ECEC services, and/or the way quality is measured. Australian and International research identifies the quality of the ECEC service, rather than attendance per se, as the driving force behind the positive effects associated with ECEC attendance.

The Australian E4Kids study (Taylor, 2016), which is the main source of Australian longitudinal evidence to date, found that the quality of teacher-child interactions predicted children's pre-academic outcomes at school entry and at grade two. The most impactful aspect of teacher-child interactions was 'Instructional support' which captured the extent to which teachers stimulated children's concept development and thinking through language-rich interactions.

This and other Australian studies have reported that the quality of teacher-child interactions is predicted by the presence of university-qualified teachers and educational leaders, low child-educator ratios and group sizes. There exists substantial evidence now to support the link between teacher qualifications and program quality (see Manning et al., 2019 for a meta-analytic review). For example, in Australia, work lead by Degotardi (e.g., Degotardi et al., 2018) has found that infant-toddler rooms lead by university qualified teachers, deliver higher quality language-promoting environments than those lead by lower qualified educators. It is now well substantiated that teacher qualification has an indirect impact on children's outcomes via its direct relationship with the quality of the educational program. Similarly, educator-child ratios and group size have also been found to predict program quality (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2016).

Together, the three elements of qualification, ratios and group size work to provide the structural supports for quality provision. *It is program quality that is the direct driver of children's outcomes*, and low-quality provision has been shown to be detrimental, especially for children who are already experiencing vulnerabilities that place them at risk of poor learning outcomes (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2010; Vernon-Feagans & Bratsch-Hines, 2013). Any initiative to increase attendance that does not factor in the preservation and enhancement of high quality ECEC provision in Australia runs the risk of increasing poor outcomes rather than supporting early learning.

Underpinning the assurance of quality ECEC in Australia is the National Quality Framework - one of the very few national quality frameworks. It is a critical lever in the provision of ECEC quality and its **integrity must be maintained**.

### *1.2. To be effective, attendance in ECE must be of sufficient duration*

**Recommendation 3:** There is compelling evidence that the longer children attend high quality ECE, either by starting earlier or by attending more frequently, and the more regularly they attend, the greater are the gains. Therefore, attention must be paid to optimising children’s regular and on-going attendance. Little is known, however, about the ‘optimal’ dosage of ECE, or what threshold is required to accrue gains; or what type of attendance pattern is the most beneficial. There is a lack of Australian evidence about the link between dosage and outcomes. Therefore, **Australian research is required that addresses questions related to attendance and outcomes.**

In ECEC programs that have shown positive results (such as the Abecedarian, Perry Pre-school Program, and Head Start) children’s attendance is over several years, and the quality of these programs is generally high (Zaslow et al. 2016). Studies from targeted programs in the United States have demonstrated that higher dosage, including more years spent in early learning and higher levels of time spent in the classroom in instruction, are positively related to higher cognitive outcomes. For example, studies by Loeb et al (2004) and Puma et al. (2012) suggest that earlier entry, and prolonged attendance (i.e., more hours per day) yield greater cognitive gains for children when compared to children who do not attend at all. Similarly, Jenkins et al (2016) found that children who entered Head Start services aged three years (and who had 2 years of attendance) had more favourable scores for pre-reading than those who entered at age four years – but not for pre-writing skills or maths (see also: Burchinal et al., 2016). Likewise, van Huizen and Platenga’s (2018) meta-analysis, found that whilst the age at which children enrolled had no effect on child development outcomes, the more intense programs (i.e., fulltime rather than parttime), those which were publicly provided (rather than private), and most especially those of higher quality, had more favourable effects. Moreover, those favourable effects were highest for children from low-income families. The relevance of evidence from other countries - where provision of ECE differs greatly from Australia - for the Australian context is questionable, however.

Further, little is known about the ‘optimal’ dosage of ECE, or what threshold is required to accrue gains; or what type of attendance pattern is the most beneficial. Studies that explore the relationship between children’s attendance at ECEC, and outcomes, often do not indicate the *amount* of ECEC children receive. Most studies simply use *enrolment* of children in ECEC as the variable – rather than attendance. There are significant differences in the number of hours per day children attend early learning, ranging from half-day (e.g. 3 hour sessional pre-school) part-day (e.g. 6 hour pre-school) and full day (up to 10 hour long day care). Further, some programs operate for a full year, others just during school term times.

Studies to date have typically not considered the number of hours children *actually* attend. Attendance at ECEC is not compulsory, so children may be enrolled, but not attend, or only attend irregularly.

Indeed, few studies have quantified children's hours of attendance in ECEC. One study that has done this is Gilley et al (2015), who drew on data from 2,600 3 – 4 year old children enrolled in the Australian E4Kids study (2010-2012). Children's attendance was collected via parent self-report in an annual survey that was checked by fieldworkers thereby limiting parental reporting errors. Gilley et al. (2015) found that both usage and attendance of ECEC increased with age, with the average weekly hours of attendance increasing from 22 hours before school entry to 26 hours per week in the year before school. Hours of attendance across the age groups varied considerably, from fewer than 10 hours per week to more than 30 hours. Factors that predicted children's attendance included: "higher family income, having two parents in paid work, fewer children in a family, lower scores on the HLE [home learning environment], being in receipt of a Health Care Card and having an easier child temperament" (Gilley et al., 2015). Gilley et al did not examine relationships between dosage and outcomes. The overall report of the E4Kids study, however, states that "E4Kids found no independently verifiable collective level of quality and dosage that assured the production of certain levels of child outcome." (Taylor, 2016, p.6).

The evidence suggesting that longer attendance in high quality ECEC has better outcomes for children— especially for children experiencing vulnerability and marginalisation - provides a compelling argument for universal on-going, regular access to ECEC for children from a young age. The lack of evidence about dosage, however, is highly problematic when trying to determine what 'amount' of ECEC children should receive in order to gain benefits. Therefore, Australian research is required that addresses questions related to attendance and outcomes.

### *1.3 A focus on school readiness, with the associated promotion of universal provision for three and four year olds may bring unintended consequences for children aged birth to three.*

**Recommendation 4:** A move towards universal access in the preschool years runs the risk of creating and reinforcing disadvantage at age three, rather than at school age. We strongly argue, therefore, that any focus on preparation for school in the pre-school years must take into account the right of infants and toddlers, and their families, to high quality ECEC, with a particular focus on increasing the qualification requirements for those working with children under three. Moreover, attention is required to the impact of quality on infants' and toddlers' educational outcomes.

Currently, around 25% of Australia's one-year-olds and 60% of our two-year-olds attend an ECEC service. Yet Australian research has demonstrated that educational disadvantage is already apparent at age three, and that this disadvantage is likely to persist to school entry and beyond (Taylor, 2016). While less attention is given to the impact of quality on infants'



and toddlers' educational outcomes than their older peers, an increasing evidence base demonstrates that the quality of infant programs predicts children's outcomes. In some cases, the quality of infant-toddler programs has been shown to predict outcomes above and beyond the benefits associated with one year of preschool education (Li et al., 2013; Yazejian et al., 2015). The foundational significance of the experiences in every child's first 1000 days must not be overlooked.

In this context, the provision of high quality of programs for infants and toddlers is a critical consideration. The majority of three- and four-year olds who attend ECEC started attending before they were three. Yet current policy directions privilege the quality of pre-school programs over that of infant-toddler programs. In the current workforce shortage, the requirements of qualified teachers to work with four-year-old children already encourages service providers to place teachers with older, rather than younger children. Expanding provision for three- to five-year olds will only exacerbate this situation unless supply shortages are addressed and the qualification requirements for those working with children under three are increased.

Furthermore, evidence of other unintentional consequences is emerging from the United States, where universal and public 'pre-k' is becoming widespread in many States (Brown, 2018). In particular, the privileging of funding and qualification requirements in pre-school programs has meant that:

- Services are reducing birth to three places in preference for those for older children.
- Some services lose financial viability due to the relatively high cost of infant-toddler ECEC provision, and
- Because some services are now competing with increasing subsidised services for three- and four-year olds, they are reducing their quality to save costs.

Any focus on preparation for school in the pre-school years, therefore, must take into account the right of infants and toddlers, and their families, to high quality ECEC. Moreover, further attention is required to the impact of quality on infants' and toddlers' educational outcomes.

## 2. Children's access to quality ECEC is negatively impacted by remoteness and socio-economic status

**Recommendation 5:** Children's access to ECEC is negatively impacted by remoteness and socio-economic status. These challenges particularly effect the participation of Aboriginal children. To increase children's and families' participation in regional and remote areas, and low socio-economic areas, the strategies needed to address these challenges must be targeted to the ECEC service's specific location. It is critical, therefore, that there is engagement and collaboration with local communities in relation to the types of support they may require.

All Australian children should be able to reach their full potential in all aspects of development including physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language domains, with access to quality early childhood education and care, regardless of income or geographical location. One of the key objectives of the Australian Government's support of ECEC is to "target improved access for, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, vulnerable and disadvantaged children" (Australian Government Productivity Commission [AGPC], 2022, p. 3), including children living in regional and remote regions and those living in poverty. Yet it has been an ongoing concern across Australia that children and families are facing challenges to accessing high quality ECEC in regional and remote areas (New South Wales Department of Education, 2017; Whiteman et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2022); Wong et al., 2023) and low SEIFA areas (AGPC, 2022).

We recognise the particular strengths of and challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities, but as researchers who are not working specifically with these populations we do not provide recommendations for this group.

### *2.1 Remoteness*

In regard to remoteness, children living in very remote areas are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable (as defined by the Australian Early Childhood Development Census [AEDC]) than their peers living in inner regional areas, and two and a half times more likely than those living in major cities (AGPC, 2022) In particular, the quality of ECEC services is lower in regional and remote areas in Australia, where services are more likely to be rated as 'Working Towards' the National Quality Standards (NQS) (the second lowest quality rating awarded by the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2022a) than those in major cities; those in very remote Australia are more than twice as likely to have achieved only a 'Working Towards' NQS rating (ACECQA, 2022a). This situation has been compounded with the current workforce issue of attracting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in regional and remote areas which has been shown to impact quality (Thorpe et al., 2020).

Challenges to children's attendance differ across regional and remote geographic locations. Recent Australian research (Wong et al., 2023) has identified that in inner regional areas, poverty is one of the most pressing factors impacting negatively on children's attendance in high quality ECEC. Removal of cost barriers and the activity test may assist here. In relation to supportive implementations in inner regional areas, these should also include access to wrap around health and wellbeing services located near ECEC. This would require a dedicated approach to target allied health professionals and early childhood teachers to

work collaboratively in this united approach<sup>1</sup>. Transport has been the factor regarded as the most pressing in outer regional and remote areas (Harrison et al., 2023). This requires further consideration due to public transport which can be non-existent in outer regional and remote areas, and travelling long distances in private vehicles can be costly in both distances and time alongside hours of ECEC operating to meet their needs. Evidently, the solutions to attendance are diverse and varied. Consequently, we argue that to increase children's and families' participation in regional and remote areas, the strategies needed to address these challenges must be nuanced and targeted to the ECEC services' specific location.

## *2.2. Low Socio-economic area*

Likewise, in low socio-economic areas (SES), it is critical that there is engagement and collaboration with local communities in relation to the types of support they may require. Local communities should be included at all stages of the process – policy making, delivery, and evaluation. For instance, an Australian study conducted by Harrison et al. (2023), that focussed on supporting low SES families' attendance at early childhood education found that local solutions, whereby ECEC educators worked at the community level to identify what was needed, was most impactful. Identified barriers (other than fees) experienced in the research literature included:

- parents' lack of awareness of the potential benefits of ECE
- difficulties with access
- financial costs related to attending ECE including: provision of food, clothing, school bags, and excursions
- comfort, trust, and cultural fit
- family beliefs and priorities including beliefs in the importance of home-based care and not valuing daily attendance, but also prioritising 'other' family matters over their child's attendance at ECE (see Whiteman et al., 2018).

The research is clear - complex barriers require diverse solutions that are context specific for the community to ensure programs that are developed are respectful of diversity and impactful for the children and families in that community. It is critical that there is engagement and collaboration with local communities in relation to the types of support

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<sup>1</sup> Responding to current and predicted service gaps requires careful consideration of professional and occupational scopes of practice. Many occupations currently practice a restricted range of activities and extending the traditional scopes of practice, particularly for healthcare professions, has been demonstrated as capable of addressing health service gaps. This is particularly valuable in areas, such as rural and remote locations, in which undersupply of medical, nursing, allied health professionals and educators (Wong et al., 2023) remains an ongoing challenge. Extended scopes of practice provide the potential for more comprehensive service provision. Pursuing extended scope of practice initiatives in Australia is a particular priority for early years services.

they may require. Alongside that, is a key principle of transparency whereby engagement with stakeholders supports informed feedback and decision-making of policies and programs.

### 3. Productivity in ECE: New theories and research is required for informing policy

**Recommendation 6:** ECEC is part of the care economy. There are requirements to ensure that services operate productively - balancing quality and cost. However, traditional ideas for increasing productivity are inappropriate for the care economy. New ideas (theories) and understandings (research) about what constitutes 'productivity' in ECEC are required to inform policy.

We recognise that commodified childcare is pivotal for labour supply, and especially so for enabling women to participate in the labour market. In this regard, ECEC is a key component of the 'care economy' - services that nurture and support particularly vulnerable populations, including children, the unwell, the elderly and the disabled (Peng, 2019). Two key concerns in the care economy are quality and cost of services. We have argued above that quality is essential for reaping the benefits of ECEC. A crucial issue, then, is balancing quality and cost.

A traditional approach to reducing costs that has been typically applied in manufacturing is through increasing productivity (Becker & Baumol, 1952). Economists typically define productivity as output per hour. In manufacturing then, increased productivity equates to greater output which reduces the price of goods. The care economy, however, has distinct features that are not well-served by these traditional theories and approaches to productivity typically used in manufacturing (Bauman, 2019). Questions arise, for example, as to what is the 'product' in ECEC – is it quality provision, or is it child outcomes, or 'something else'? Which aspects of the labour processes of the care economy occupations, including ECEC, affect the ability to scale-up services and reduce cost? Further, what is the threshold balance between quality (however defined) and cost?

Despite their economic importance, there are limited studies exploring these issues. Greater attention is therefore required to developing theories and addressing questions about the ECEC care economy to support evidence-based policy-making.

### 4. ECEC sector workforce requirements

**Recommendation 7:** The complex work of providing high quality ECEC that supports all children, their families and communities, and meets national policy objectives, is predicated on a workforce – teachers, educators and leaders - with specialised skills, knowledge and understandings, and who are well. The current workforce crisis threatens this quality lever. Supporting the workforce requires: **attention to, and investment in, initial teacher / educator education; a focus on interprofessional practice; working in partnership with diverse families; access to on-going**

**professional development; opportunities for mentoring; the provision of safe adult workplaces; access to clinical supervision; and decent pay and work conditions.**

Process quality, defined as the quality of interaction and activities directly experienced by each child, is key to supporting the proposed Early Years Strategy vision for children's learning, wellbeing and development. The quality of the early childhood workforce is central to ensuring high process quality. Recent research has identified the individual skills, knowledge, dispositions and understandings educators require, as well as the organisational structures required, to ensure high quality ECEC (Gibson, et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, however, the current ECEC workforce is in crisis, with high attrition leading to unprecedented staff shortages, both in Australia and internationally (Thorpe et al., 2020). Attention to the workforce is, therefore, a critical issue. In particular, initial and ongoing preparation and professional learning - including preparation for working in inter-professional ways - mentoring, access to clinical supervision, and educator pay working conditions are priorities for national attention (OECD, 2022).

#### *4.1 Initial Teacher & Educator Education*

To ensure educators are prepared for the complex work of ECEC requires significant pre-service specialised education. In relation to preparatory and ongoing learning, OECD recommendations include:

- Focusing initial teacher education content on process quality and supporting implementation of process quality skills through work-based learning.
- Building existing educators' knowledge and skills through ongoing professional learning that aligns with the needs of staff (including leaders).
- Ensuring policy attends to professional progression e.g., through uniform accreditation of particular levels of achievement or progress and uniform access to professional recognition and rewards for staff with the same role in different parts of the early childhood education (ECEC) sector.

#### *4.2 Supporting Interprofessional Practice*

The early years is a time of life where health, learning, development and well-being (e.g. physical, cognitive and social-emotional) are inextricably linked. Supporting children and their families is best achieved through close collaboration of multiple professionals through an inter-professional or integrated approach. To align with the vision of integrated services as laid out in the proposed Early Years Strategy, there is a need to develop workforce capacity through interdisciplinary training (health, education, social care, disability) at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as developing interdisciplinary continuous professional development programs. Initial Teacher Education courses are required to address rigorous accreditation requirements which means that often the focus is on curriculum areas. However, consideration is needed to emphasise integration and holistic

child-centred care right from the start; but in an already full curriculum, this does need rethinking.

There is potential for creating a new professional in this space, for example a multi-disciplinary trained professional that equips practitioners with broad-based knowledge and skills across healthcare, child development and education, and social welfare (examples of such models have been implemented in other countries, e.g., Singapore). Potentially this would help reduce workload for ECE professionals who report on the difficulties of supporting children and families within their current roles as it requires a huge time commitment in not only getting allied health support professionals, but also then working with them to support the child and family (Bull et al, submitted 2023). Creating this professional role could subsequently positively impact workforce retention in ECE.

#### *4.3 Working in partnership with diverse families*

Children's self-determination is influenced through strong and culturally aware family-professional partnerships (Palmer, Summers, Brotherson et al (2012). Families play a key role in providing, maintaining, and supporting opportunities for children's development of self-determination. An effective partnership in which both educators and families engage collaboratively in the decisions made each day regarding the types of experiences and learning opportunities their children will have provides opportunities to practice choice, engagement, and self-regulation. As families come in many forms it is critical that educators are supported to build responsive relationships that recognise and respect this diversity. For example, in Australia there are currently over 100 ethnic or national groups, we have gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex families, families from diverse economic or income status, nuclear and non-nuclear which includes single parents, blended families, adoptive [foster or kinship care], surrogate or extended families. Other contextual factors include families who experience complexities arising through factors such as poverty, drug and alcohol dependencies, and family violence. Barblett et al (2021, p.18) argues that "educators should be skilled to recognise the diverse makeup of families and how to engage responsively, without bias." And the research evidence supports this statement (see for example: Averett et al., 2017; Hadley & Rouse, 2021; Liang & Cohrsen, 2019).

#### *4.4 On-going professional development*

The research evidence indicates that the attainment of high-quality outcomes for children and families in ECEC settings is linked to early childhood qualifications and opportunities for professional learning (OECD, 2012; 2020). Australian researchers Waniganayake et al. (2023, in press) define professional development and learning as "continuous study in terms of understanding professional knowledge and skills and then using these to advance professionally by refining and renewing practices as an early childhood educator". Researchers argue that professional development and learning needs to move beyond 'one off' seminars and/or workshops as these are less effective in transforming practice (Colmer, et al., 2014; Fleet et al., 2016; Hadley et al., 2015). The OECD report (2020), however, notes

that centre embedded models are the least common, with offsite training still being the most common form of professional development. To be able to support onsite professional development and learning, requires organisational support - such as pupil free days - which is a common model adopted in primary schools.

#### *4.5. Mentoring*

Sustainability and longevity of the early childhood teacher and educator workforce is critical for the provisioning of high-quality early childhood programs. High turnover and poor retention rates in the early childhood sector has been attributed to stress and burnout, poor status and limited professional autonomy (Bretherton, 2010; Irvine et al., 2016; Jovanovic, 2013; Press et al., 2015), as well as poor relationships with other educators (McKinlay et al., 2018). Research in the school sector has noted that for "new teachers to feel confident and competent they needed to be sustained by - and be able to sustain - relationships based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity" (Le Cornu, 2013, p.2). For a sustainable workforce the relational aspects of educators work also needs attention (Cumming et al., 2021).

Mentoring is an effective strategy in supporting early childhood teachers to improve workplace practices (Onchiwari & Keengwe, 2010; Simpson et al., 2007). Waniganayake et al. (2023, in press) define a mentor as "an effective sounding board or a critical friend who provides confidential advice, support and guidance to novice or experienced leaders." In recent years, the governments of countries such as England and Singapore have also "focused on mentoring as an effective approach to enhance the quality of the early childhood workforce and its programs" (Ang, 2012 in Wong, 2015, p.51).

More recently there have been programs in Australia supporting the workforce. For example, in New South Wales (NSW) Hadley et al.'s (2021) NSW program trained experienced early childhood teachers in mentoring and then matched them with recent graduates (mentees). A follow up program, led by Andrews et al (2023) supported those studying an early childhood teaching degree with an experienced mentor from the original program. Both programs led to successful outcomes for both the mentors and mentees but confirmed that mentoring is a highly skilled role and mentors must be appropriately trained prior to interacting with their mentees. These authors have also argued for a national mentoring program to be developed and funded with appropriate back fill (Hadley et al, 2021) for educators throughout Australia.

#### *4.6. Supporting Educator Wellbeing*

Australian researchers Cumming et al., (2020, 2021), Thorpe et al. (2020), and Hine et al., (2022) all highlight the importance of well-being and the links this has to recruitment and retention of the early childhood workforce. Job satisfaction and its relationship with retention is also important, and Jones' (2017; 2019; 2021) research found that practitioners who stayed were highly satisfied because they: (i) felt autonomous in their role (were trusted to do their job); (ii) related strongly to the setting (including other practitioners,



children, families and the leader of the program); and (iii) felt competent in terms of feeling effective and challenged in their workplace.

In relation to working conditions, OECD recommendations include:

- Providing differentiated salaries, benefits and job security according to roles but with consideration of the cost of living in each national context.
- Allocating time for preparation and planning not only of pedagogical but of aspects supporting process quality, such as adequate time for intra-staff communication as well as with parents and other professionals, and ongoing professional learning of different types.
- Diminishing differences between working conditions for those working in schools and ECE sector, as well as between those with the same roles in different parts of the ECE sector.

#### *4.7. Provision of clinical supervision*

One approach for supporting educators that has been found to be successful in contributing to retention of centre directors, is clinical supervision (Wong et al., under review). Clinical supervision is a formalised process of review and reflection on a supervisee's work, undertaken with a (usually) more experienced worker or skilled facilitator. The aims of clinical supervision processes are to assess and assure quality – to potentially improve the supervisee's work with their clients; to facilitate emotional processing, assist with coping and relieve work-related stress; and to support and further the supervisee's competence and capability (Bernstein & Edwards, 2012). Wong et al (under review) conducted an evaluation of a clinical supervision program supporting centre directors in Australian early learning services facing disadvantage. The evaluation found that best-practice supervision has a range of benefits for centre directors' well-being, professional practice and growth and contributed to centre directors' decision to remain in the profession, even in the face of complex challenges.

#### *4.8. Improve pay and work conditions*

**Recommendation 8:** Existing research literature and National survey data have identified that ECEC educators' and teachers' wages and employment conditions form a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECE workforce. We therefore recommend that workplace relations reform and associated financial and workplace supports be put in place to address historical pay and condition inequities. State and Territory-based initiatives may focus on reform to parts rather than the whole ECEC workforce operating in their jurisdiction. We recommend that this Productivity Commission report be considered alongside the findings and recommendations of the Pay and Conditions research project (Degotardi et al., underway), to facilitate a coordinated National approach to workplace relations reform and associated financial and workforce supports.



The provision of high quality ECE is reliant on the availability of a skilled, healthy and stable workforce (OECD, 2019). A stable workforce is cost-effective for employers, with estimates that the recruitment of a new educator costs around 26 weeks of average wages, and training new staff costs around two and a half weeks of average wages (Safe Work Australia, 2015). Disruptions to team functioning and children's learning are also avoided when turnover is reduced in early childhood education services (Schaack et al., 2021). However, Australia is experiencing a critical shortage of EC educators and teachers – a situation that has been growing for at least a decade. Staff turnover has been estimated at between 20% and 40% per year, with the lower figure more representative of metropolitan services, and the higher more representative of rural and remote services (Fenech et al., 2021). Turnover is especially problematic in the early childhood education sector, as ongoing relationships between educators, children and families are at the core of high-quality practice (Jackson, 2020).

Workforce shortages have been exacerbated by the stressors of COVID-19 (Rogers et al., 2023; McFarland et al., 2022) paired with a strong growth in labour demand in the wider workforce driving demand for early childhood education places for children (CELA et al. 2021; Social Research Centre, 2021; The Front Project, 2020). These factors have contributed to current job vacancy levels that are more than double those existing two years ago for both teachers and educators (National Skills Commission, 2022).

Historically, work in the ECE sector has been undervalued, largely due to the feminised nature of the ECE occupations (Cumming et al., 2020), associated gender-biased assumptions in wage setting, combined with the entrenched gender wage gap in the Australian labour market (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2022). It is of little surprise that dissatisfaction with pay is cited as a main reason for leaving the sector (Fenech et al., 2022). Yet wages are one of a network of intersecting conditions that educators consider when choosing to enter or leave the profession. Insufficient leave provisions, little work flexibility and poor job security, lack of professional and career development opportunities, high workload and poor administrative and leadership support have been cited as sources of staff dissatisfaction (CELA et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2022; Fenech et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018; United Voice, 2017).

Currently, the Australian Governments at national, state and territory levels, are consulting, and working collaboratively with ECE stakeholders, regulatory bodies and researchers from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood to identify industrial conditions that will increase the attraction and retention of educators and teachers (Degotardi et al., underway). These investigative activities are guided by the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* (the *Workforce Strategy*) 2022-2031 (ACECQA, 2021a) and the accompanying

*Implementation and Evaluation Plan* (ACECQA, 2022c). A key action of the Workforce Strategy is to: “Investigate options for improving professional standing, and workforce pay and conditions, including examining the associated barriers and constraints (Focus Area 1)” (ACECQA, 2021b, n.p.).

Initiatives to address challenges raised in the Workforce Strategy are already underway in most Australian States and Territories. Focal areas of these initiatives include: teacher scholarships, careers awareness raising, and promotion of greater respect for the early childhood sector (ACECQA, 2022b). While these initiatives address areas of concern for specific States and Territories, they rarely apply to the entire ECEC workforce within the jurisdiction. For example, initiatives may only apply to preschools/kindergartens, teachers, or those located in specific areas of each jurisdiction. This underlines the need for a National approach to improving the areas mentioned above, to ensure they reach all members of the ECEC workforce. The research report, including recommendations collaboratively generated by CRECE researchers and ECE stakeholders and policy makers, will be presented to the Australian Government’s Education Ministers Meeting in December 2023. We therefore recommend that the recommendations of this Productivity Commission report be considered alongside the findings and recommendations of the Pay and Conditions research project to facilitate a coordinated National approach to workplace relations reform and associated financial and workforce supports.

## 5. Removal of the activity test.

**Recommendation 9:** A recent review of the activity test has shown that it has a negative impact on i) workforce participation and ii) the effective and equitable provision. We, therefore, strongly recommend the removal of the current activity test for subsidised access to ECEC.

Originally instated to encourage participation in the workforce, the activity test limits ECEC access to children of parents who are not working or who are working part time (Impact Economics and Policy, 2022). As such, it creates a significant barrier to workforce participation and disincentivises workforce participation. Because the activity test applies to the parent with lower work hours, this disproportionately effects women. Moreover, the activity test creates a significant compliance and reporting burden to parents, who have to report their income fortnightly to have their subsidy calculated.

Linking fee subsidy to work activity frames ECEC purely within the economic productivity agenda, and overlooks the benefits of ECEC for children. This is particularly the case for children from disadvantaged, vulnerable or culturally diverse families. These children are disproportionately impacted by the activity test, yet it is these children who will benefit the most from high quality ECEC provision. The activity test therefore creates and reinforces

inequities which place many children at risk of poor academic and social outcomes at school and beyond. We conclude by again recommending that **ECEC be a child-led initiative**.

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