

Queensland Council of Deans of Education
Response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report:
A path to universal early childhood education and care

The Queensland Council of Deans of Education

The Queensland Council of Deans of Education (QCDE) comprises Deans of Education (or equivalent) from all Queensland universities offering teacher education programs and is affiliated with the Australian Council of Deans of Education. Member institutions offer a diverse range of early childhood teacher education programs to nurture and support a qualified and professional ECEC workforce (i.e., birth to 5 years, birth to 8 years and birth to 12 years). All of our early childhood teacher education programs are recognised and approved by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA); programs enabling graduates to teach in school are also accredited by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

The purpose of QCDE is to lead, advocate and grow education and lifelong learning through teaching, research and engagement. We commend the national focus on increasing access to high quality early childhood education and care prior-to-school, and welcome the opportunity to submit this response to the Productivity Commission draft report: *A path to universal early childhood education and care*. QCDE members have discussed the draft report and recommendations, concentrating on those relating to early childhood teacher education. This submission draws together our collective views, as leaders in teacher education and educational research. See Appendix A for a list of QCDE member institutions and contributors to this submission. For the purpose of this submission, our focus on ECEC here relates to early education settings catering for children birth to 5 years prior to school entry.

Overarching comments

Recognising early childhood education and care (ECEC) as the foundation of a modern education system, QCDE strongly supports movement towards universal ECEC underpinned by a focus on children’s right to access high quality inclusive ECEC.

We congratulate the Commission on the work that has been undertaken to date, and welcome the central positioning of children in the report. While the intent is clear, we suggest foregrounding the right of children to access high quality inclusive ECEC could be strengthened in the recommendations. If we are to do our best for Australia’s children, this child-centred approach needs to be reflected in all recommendations.

While ECEC in Australia faces a number of challenges as outlined in the report, there are strengths to be built upon. Australia has a world leading National Quality Framework, which includes the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), that places the quality of children’s experiences at the centre and is grounded in early years pedagogies. The EYLF has recently been updated, and has widespread support from the early childhood sector.

QCDE supports the move to universal access to high quality ECEC from an earlier age. However, we caution that a child-centered early childhood system is dependent upon a nexus between a strong parental leave system; access to high quality ECEC; and family responsive workplaces. While the report is focused on ECEC, we note that a number of recommendations arising out of draft findings 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 appear focused on increasing women's workforce participation without reference to measures that might seek to support parental responsibilities for family life. A strengthened parental leave system would help ensure that parent's return to work in the year after a child from choice not necessity.

QCDE supports access to increased hours of high quality inclusive ECEC acknowledging shared benefits for children, families and the community. While recognising the important role of ECEC in enabling workforce participation, we believe that the expansion of the ECEC system must firmly position children at the centre and occur in ways that are in the best interests of children.

To realise desired outcomes, any expansion of provision must be tied to the quality of provision. Critical to quality is improving the supply of qualified and skilled early childhood teachers and nurturing and sustaining a professional ECEC workforce.

We now turn to key recommendations concerning Initial Teacher Education for early childhood teachers.

Early Childhood Teacher Education

3.1 Reduce barriers to upskilling including accelerated pathways, funding and support

Key points

The Australian community has high expectations of teachers and educators working across the education continuum, reflected in a plethora of recent national and state policy reports (NTWAP, TEEP, Shaping our Future, Queensland Workforce Strategy). In ECEC, increased expectations are fueled by the growing body of research evidence and public recognition of the influence and importance of the early years on learning, development and wellbeing for all children, and, in particular, children experiencing developmental vulnerability and disadvantage. Acknowledging the professional nature of the work of teachers in ECEC, it is critical to ensure that programs of initial early childhood teacher education are preparing graduates who have specialist knowledge, are highly skilled pedagogues, and critically reflective and resilient teachers.

- QCDE values prior learning and endorses the focus on strengthening qualification and career pathways in ECEC. We agree that there is opportunity to explore accelerated program models and note that member universities currently offer accelerated programs of teacher education (e.g., Queensland's Turn to Teaching – Internship program; and flexible academic calendars that provide students options for acceleration). Drawing on our collective experience, we strongly believe in the need to offer and support a range of

study options (full-time and part-time), recognising that accelerated programs intensify study, are demanding in time and energy and do not suit all students, nor ensure their successful completion of their studies.

- QCDE strongly supports targeting and support for vocationally qualified educators to upskill their qualifications to become early childhood teachers. Articulation from the Diploma of ECEC into an early childhood teaching degree is a well-established and successful pathway in Queensland. However, there is opportunity for further effort and investment to promote and support this pathway. This includes:
 - ensuring universities are mapping new courses against the new national training package to support articulation and optimise credit;
 - providing scholarships that enable these students to study part-time where this is their preference to balance study, work and family responsibilities;
 - funding transition programs and support, with a particular focus on academic literacy and skills to support student engagement, learning and success at university.
- QCDE commends current activity and initiatives to provide tailored wrap-around support for these educators to complete their degree. Recognising that universities offer a range of services and supports, we see this as a collaborative effort. To ensure maximum benefit to students and value for money, there is a need for close collaboration between key stakeholders (e.g., government, peak organisations, employers VET and universities) when planning, implementing and evaluating support programs.
- Engagement in high quality supervised professional experience is widely recognised as a critical element in initial teacher education, regardless of the education setting. This provides preservice teachers with the opportunity to apply theory, knowledge and skills in practice, to learn from skilled and experienced teachers, and to work with diverse children and families in diverse ECEC contexts and communities. QCDE does not support a reduction in professional experience requirements for teachers in ECEC, and advocates for continued parity in standards and requirements for the teaching profession (i.e., one teaching profession – AITSL, 2018).
- Promoting the contribution of a carefully sequenced and scaffolded program of professional experience to teacher preparation, professional autonomy and resilience, QCDE advocates for preservice teachers to be paid during professional experience. While this will require substantial public investment, we see this as a shared responsibility that extends to employers, and draw attention to excellent examples of employer-sponsored scholarships and bursaries that include paid professional experience (e.g., G8 Education, Goodstart Early Learning).
- Reflective of current policy and practice amongst QCDE members, there is potential for some professional experience to be completed in the workplace. We note that under Permission to Teach (PTT) in Queensland, students can generally complete 1 – 2

placements in the PTT school, pending the school demonstrating how it will ensure quality support, supervision and integrity of assessment. We are also aware of the prac-swap initiative in ECEC. While supporting some flexibility, QCDE urges caution here and strongly advocates the benefits of working with several skilled and experienced mentor teachers and professional experience in diverse settings. In the case of professional experience being undertaken in the workplace, QCDE strongly advocates that preservice teachers are supported to concentrate on successfully completing professional experience, are not counted towards minimum ratio requirements, and are supervised by a registered and qualified early childhood teacher.

3.2 Support innovative delivery of teaching qualifications

Key points

- QCDE welcomes funding support to assist universities to co-design and trial innovative approaches to initial early childhood teacher education. Recognising variation in programs, and that specialist early childhood teachers are needed in prior-to-school ECEC settings and the early years of school, we strongly advocate for funding to be available to programs spanning birth to 5 years and birth to 8 years. Reflective of recent policy report findings and recommendations (TEEP), there is a need for such initiatives to include funding to support their evaluation.

3.3 Improve registration arrangements for teachers in prior-to-school settings

Key points

QCDE works closely with the Queensland College of Teachers and promotes the importance of teacher registration in supporting professional identity, professional practice and career pathways in education. We advocate the right of all qualified teachers to seek teacher registration, regardless of education setting or the age of learners. We support work underway in Queensland to address current barriers to registration for early childhood teachers who have completed a four-year birth to 5 degree, and for four-year degree qualified early childhood teachers who choose to work with children below kindergarten age. In sum, QCDE strongly supports one teaching profession, and the recommendation “that all early childhood teachers in Australia, regardless of their employment setting, be required to be registered by teacher regulatory authorities, under a consistent national approach” (AITSL, 2018, p. iv).

- While acknowledging current teacher shortages, QCDE is concerned by the loss of parity in qualification requirements for teachers working in primary and secondary schools.
- Recognising ACECQA has approved three-year qualifications, QCDE advocates this be considered a short-term workforce strategy to address immediate challenges, with incentives and support to encourage three-year qualified teachers to pursue a fourth year of study in the short-medium term.

- With this in mind, QCDE supports access to provisional teacher registration for teachers who have completed a three-year early childhood teaching qualification recognised by ACECQA, with the requirement for an additional year of study (four-year degree) to gain full teacher registration. QCDE does not support a dual-system model of teacher registration that separates the profession based on where teachers work (akin to the Victorian approach to teacher registration).
- Promoting the importance of parity between teachers in terms of professional qualifications, recognition and registration, QCDE strongly supports enhanced pathways for early childhood teachers in prior-to-school ECEC settings to gain recognition and remuneration as Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers. We see this as integral to strengthened career pathways in ECEC.
- As noted, QCDE strongly supports the concept of “one teaching profession”. This extends to a unified and inclusive Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and one unified system of teacher registration (whether state-based or national). We advocate for the promised revision of the APST (AITSL, 2018), to ensure these respect, reflect and support the professional work of early childhood teachers and the environments in which they work. We strongly believe the APST should be written in a way that clearly speaks to all teachers, supports their professional growth and career progression, regardless of education setting.
- QCDE recognises the different but complementary roles of AITSL and ACECQA. Focusing on initial teacher education courses that enable graduates to teach in prior-to-school and school settings, we advocate a review of the current separation of accreditation (AITSL) and approval (ACECQA) with a view to drawing these into one coherent and supportive accreditation process. This includes strengthening understanding of the professional work of early childhood teachers in ECEC settings and schools, and ensuring a balanced and equal focus on preparing early childhood teachers to work in both settings.

3.4 Mentoring beginning ECTs

There is a compelling evidence-base to support comprehensive induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers as they transition from study to the profession. QCDE recognises and commends growing attention and investment in mentoring programs for beginning teachers across the three school sectors in Queensland. Acknowledging the fragmented nature of the ECEC system, and excellent mentoring and support programs offered by some larger employers, we need to design and fund programs that ensure access to quality mentoring for all beginning early childhood teachers in ECEC.

Key points

- QCDE advocates a model of shared responsibility for mentoring beginning early childhood teachers in ECEC, that includes the role of the Approved Provider in supporting induction and transition to teaching, ongoing professional learning and growth, and the shift from provisional to full teacher registration.
- Recognising current workforce challenges in ECEC, and leveraging successful approaches within the school sector, we agree that state and territory governments should support access to structured evidence-informed mentoring and support programs for beginning early childhood teachers.
- Acknowledging the current shortage of qualified and registered early childhood teachers available to mentor and support beginning early childhood teachers, QCDE suggests that universities could play an important role here. Our vision is that teachers involved in the delivery of early childhood teacher education could continue to provide mentoring and support to clusters of beginning early childhood teachers. We would be pleased to elaborate on this idea but note that our current academic workforce is stretched and this would be dependent on funding support.

3.5 Improve pathways and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to obtain ECEC qualifications

QCDE advocates the need for and benefits of strengthening the diversity of the teaching workforce. We believe the teaching workforce should reflect the diversity of the Australian community.

Key points

- QCDE strongly supports initiatives to increase the accessibility and responsiveness of early childhood teacher education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This involves ensuring a culturally safe learning environment, the capacity to incorporate contextually responsive initiatives such as ‘both-ways’ learning, and clear pathways to teaching degrees that give credit for prior learning.
- Seeking to strengthen the diversity of the ECEC workforce, we note at present there is very limited data and information available about cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) within the workforce. We are aware that Family Day Care (FDC) Australia has done some excellent work in this space in relation to the FDC workforce, and urge for similar attention in other ECEC contexts. We support the regular and robust collection of ECEC workforce data, which must extend to include information about the CALD workforce.

3.6 Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce

Access to ongoing professional development is key to supporting the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care. Appropriate professional development can both improve quality, and facilitate staff retention.

Key points

- QCDE advocates shared responsibility for ongoing professional learning and development, recognising the interrelated roles and responsibilities of employers, professional organisations, early childhood teachers and governments. We recognise there are many positive examples of employer support for professional learning, spanning scholarships to upgrade qualifications, carefully sequenced programs of professional learning and building the capacity of Educational Leaders to mentor and support ongoing learning and improved practice within ECEC settings. We also recognise and commend proactive initiatives by government, for example, significant investment by the Victorian Government in evidence-informed programs of professional learning over several years.
- QCDE points to the importance of assuring high quality evidence-informed professional learning programs and resources. Mindful of the explosion of private training organisations, and continuing concerns about quality in vocational education and training, QCDE believes that government has a critical role to play in coordinating and quality assuring funded professional development in ECEC.
- QCDE recognises the former national Professional Support Coordinator program as a highly effective approach to delivering high quality professional learning within diverse state contexts that is relevant and responsive to regional needs and priorities.

Creation of a new independent Early Childhood Education and Care Commission

- QCDE sees merit in the ‘stewardship model’ and creation of an independent national ECEC Commission to drive a universal high quality inclusive ECEC system. In the absence of detail on the purpose, scope and responsibilities of the proposed commission, QCDE offers the following observations:
 - First and foremost, the primary purpose of an ECEC Commission should be to position children at the centre of the ECEC system and ensure that all policy decisions are guided by the best interests of children participating in ECEC.
 - There is a need for clear definition and delineation of the role of the Commission, with consideration of how this will complement and work with other related departments and agencies, such as ACECQA and state and territory education departments.

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