



SUBMISSION TO THE
PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION
INQUIRY

EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE



Here for you

Page 2

Community Connections Solutions
Australia acknowledges the traditional
custodians of the land and waterways on
which we live and work. We pay respect to
elders past and present.



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About CCSA

CCSA is a peak body with a vision for sustainable and valued early childhood education and care (ECEC). CCSA partners with and advocates for ECEC services to ensure positive outcomes for children and communities. We achieve this by providing leadership and operational support using our expertise in meeting the governance, management, training, business and workplace relations needs of early childhood education and care settings.

CCSA is approaching its 54th year of operation, supporting both commercial and not-for-profit ECEC services with governance, management and operations, sector compliance, sustainability and effective workplace relations activities. We deliver training and support that builds service capability, presenting many forums, workshops and individual consultations to ECEC services across NSW. This is complemented by providing training or consultancies to individual services across the operational areas of organisational management, governance, financial management and leadership integrated with professional ECEC practice.

CCSA has been contracted by both state and federal governments to provide support to individual organisations and the sector more generally. CCSA develops strategies and practices that leave a legacy for the future health of each organisation it supports and the sector more broadly.

Since our establishment we have built a thorough knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by children's services in rural and remote areas, by way of regular contact through our 'Members Information Line', our Regional and Remote Forums, on-line discussions and seminars, and our consulting work ranging from very small services through to large-scale multi-site services.

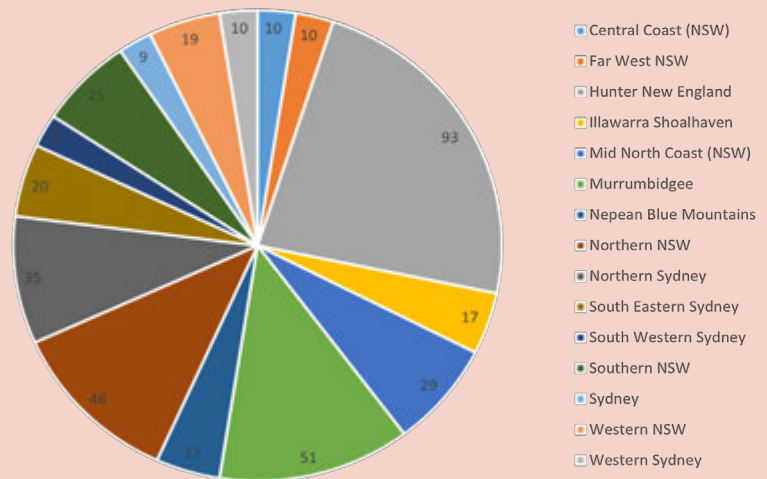


CCSA Membership

Currently CCSA has approximately 525 for profit and not-for-profit members across NSW which include –

- Long day care
- Preschool
- Mobiles
- Outside School Hours
- Family Day Care
- Occasional Care
- Multi-purpose
- Early Intervention
- Recruitment agency

A large number are in regional or remote areas.



CCSA is well placed to comment on the current and future needs of the sector as an organisation that supports both employers and educators in children’s services, through our continuous involvement in the training and professional development in the sector, and through continuous engagement with both sides of the employment relationship and service delivery issues. The broad member base of service delivery types and governance structures provides an accurate sector view.

CCSA ‘s staff and board have relevant qualifications and many years’ experience in professional, management, governance and policy positions within the ECEC sector in large, small and diverse organisations across the state.

CCSA acknowledges the continued valuable contribution of its members to the information provided in this submission as well as partner organisations and makes this contribution to support the department’s aim to ensure that children in regional and remote areas have access to sustainable, high quality early childhood education and start school with the skills they need to engage in learning.

Current representation on government advisory bodies



CCSA also plays a leadership and advocacy role at a state and national level in order to -

- advocate for high quality and affordable early childhood education and care services
- assist government develop and implement effective policy and understand sector needs
- increase community awareness about the value of quality ECEC experiences and qualified early childhood professionals
- promote effective workplaces and excellence in service delivery being a key support for sustainable organisations and better outcomes for children

1. NSW Early Childhood Education Advisory Group
2. NESA's Early Childhood Reference Group
3. ECAG Universal Pre-Kindergarten Sub-Group meeting
4. Australian Government ECECRG
5. Macquarie University Cooperative Research Centre on the Care Economy
6. ACECQA National Workforce Strategy Stakeholder Reference Group [SRG] Meeting
7. Universal Pre-Kindergarten – Submitting an expression of interest to pilot
8. Thrive by Five Regular Campaign Meetings
9. Thrive By Five Rural and Remote Campaign
10. Workforce Summit – United Workers Union & ECA sector campaign
11. ECAG Subgroup Extraordinary Meeting - Start Strong Capital Works Grant Program
12. Meeting with The Hon Fiona Nash, Regional Education Commissioner
13. Supporting Families into Early Childhood Education Community of Practice



Introduction

CCSA maintains that all children have the rights laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which Australia is a signatory. These rights are universal, even in situations where there are greater challenges for those rights to be delivered. CCSA members in regional areas have long maintained that while it may be more costly to provide the same services for children in these areas, or to overcome barriers to access and participation, these children have no less value than those in metropolitan locations, and most particularly those in more disadvantaged circumstances. It is important to recognise that children are not able to make choices about where they grow up.

Inquiry terms

In making this submission to the inquiry CCSA understands the scope of the inquiry as an examination of :

1. affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children
2. developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school
3. economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation, particularly for women, and contributing to productivity
4. outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability
5. the efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.
6. Other interesting or complementary inquiries

We note while not being limited in the range of matters to be addressed the Productivity Commission has been tasked with making recommendations about identified issues in the Sector. We have compiled our submission into sections, each one addressing some of those priorities.



CCSA acknowledges the Commonwealth Government has a range of strategies, initiatives and reforms that interact with the early years including the following:

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC):

- Cheaper Child Care for Working Families election commitment
- National Quality Framework (NQF) Review – implementation of changes to the Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations and guidance for the sector
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care Sector
- Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025
- Shaping Our Future: National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy – development of implementation plan and commitments to boost ECEC workforce – incl. fee free TAFE places, Y Care Careers program

Disability:

- Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031
- National Autism Strategy

First Nations:

- Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership 2022
- Early Childhood Care Development Sector Strengthening Plan
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Health and Wellbeing

- National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030
- National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- National Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028
- National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement
- National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030
- Treasury Wellbeing Framework
- National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality

Safety:

- National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032
- Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031



Government policy has not responded well to the value arguments regarding children's education in the early years,

Interactions with existing and planned ECEC policy settings and funding

Generally, government policy has not responded well to the value arguments regarding children's education in the early years, even after research has provided significant foundation for both the short- and long-term benefits to individuals and to society at large. The requirement of governments to view outcomes narrowly in economic and productivity terms paying little attention to social benefit has contributed to successive governments considering ECEC in market terms and rely on the market to determine the type, placement and quality of services provided.

National Quality Agenda

CCSA continues to support the National Quality Agenda and its recognition of both economic and social benefits of quality in the early years, albeit that the social benefit will also provide the foundation for longer term economic benefit. The NQA recognises that the ECEC sector must be led, and driven by government, if these benefits are to be achieved and opportunities are to be provided for all children, rather restricted to only those children determined by market forces. Governments in all jurisdictions need to play an active part, individually and through National Cabinet, to deliver a workforce that supports the NQA objectives.

Collaboration across Jurisdictions

As ECEC sits across and supports the outcomes of multiple agencies including education, health and welfare, it is important that there be co-operation and collaboration across these portfolios so that there is integration in service planning and delivery rather than within the silos of individual departments and agencies. CCSA members in regional areas also report having to deal with both state and federal departments in relation to programs with similar outcomes resulting in an increased strain on available resources. Common responses to this question by CCSA consultation participants was that the Commonwealth should be proactive in operating across jurisdictions and departments, applying an integrated approach across education, health and welfare. Our position results from service providers telling us they want governments at all levels co-ordinating programs so that services don't have to deal with multiple departments and agencies which uses more resources and impedes effective delivery.

The delivery system, including funding models, needs to recognise that engagement with community and other agencies or departments requires the commitment of resources of the service provider. Funding models need to recognise that investment in upskilling and ongoing community engagement, focused on increasing access and attendance, is a cost-effective delivery.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

The introduction of the NDIS has been challenging for ECEC services and in particular early intervention services that lost funding with the conclusion of ADHC support. In most circumstances older individuals with additional needs have the capacity to make choices for themselves regarding support and associated services. Families with prior to school age children in this situation must make choices on their behalf and are not necessarily best placed to make these judgements in relation to early learning opportunities and have relied on professionals in early intervention services to inform and guide them. Allied health professionals are also not best placed to be supporting families in relation to early learning and inclusive practice. It would be beneficial for the state and commonwealth governments to link with the local ECEC sector regarding the effective implementation of the NDIS for including prior to school age children in mainstream services effectively.





It is important that workforce development responds to contemporary knowledge and practice in ECEC.

ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements

Improving Governance

CCSA maintains a workforce development strategy will benefit from recognising the specific knowledge and skills needed at all levels of service delivery in the ECEC sector, and furthermore respond to the need to improve the structural support provided by government to agencies with the specific knowledge and experience to assist building governance and management capacity, rather than focusing particularly on educators.

CCSA's support role in the sector identified a lack of knowledge or different understanding of the regulatory environment between service managers and members of the governing body can lead to difficult or dysfunctional employment relationships between management and the service manager (on-site manager). This inhibits the effective operation of the service. Preventing or overcoming this situation requires a higher level of management skill than usually exists within a service. It requires the development of governance and operational systems that recognise the strengths and weaknesses of this structure and a collaborative management approach to respond to it.

A significant part of CCSA's support role continues to be assisting services deal with service challenges and, along with it, increase their capacity by providing accurate and timely information regarding effective staff management practices in relation to both staff and governance.

Skilled Workforce

It is important that workforce development responds to contemporary knowledge and practice in ECEC. This knowledge recognises that children learn and develop continuously from the time they're born so that all care settings must provide skilled and knowledgeable staff to support this development. The differentiation between service types is valuable as a descriptor to identify the demographic of families the service is delivered to, and a descriptor for purposes of assisting parents make that choice. All care settings provide for children's education- it is the quality of these programs that is dependent on a skilled and capable staff and management. The National Quality Framework recognises all care settings as education environments. The ECEC workforce in NSW has been suffering shortages of qualified staff for some years. Parity with peers in infants and primary school settings will facilitate a more responsive, focused and motivated workforce with increased quality and productivity. Regional, rural and remote services are also often hampered in recruitment by distance, isolation, shortage of available housing, lack of services in towns and villages, limited employment opportunities for partners of teachers and schools for their children.



CCSA agrees that continuity of staff is a significant contributor to better outcomes for children. We also understand that turnover is high in some situations. Stability in preschools (retention) is generally better than other services primarily because of more favourable conditions such as shorter working hours and little requirement to attend the preschool in children's holidays, particularly compared to those in long day care with longer shifts and only 4 weeks annual leave. A contributor to turnover is the number of certificate III trainees who complete their training on-site but are not retained by their employer. Retention would mean paying a full-time salary compared to the training wage. A further issue is that trainee schemes encourages employers to not retain a trainee as they can then continue to access government employment incentives on a continual basis for subsequent trainees. The scheme can be used as a strategy for income generation or to limit wages expenditure rather than a commitment to training new staff who will become valuable full-time employees.

Job seekers without qualifications often see the ECEC sector as something that is not skilled work and they will 'feel good' about working with children. This contributes to turnover of non-qualified staff. Our experience of the sector demonstrates the knowledge, skill and commitment is required along with its complexity.

NSW Teacher Shortage

Though NSW has had a regulatory requirement for university trained teachers in children's services for many years, there has been a shortage of appropriately qualified teachers over the last decade. This is particularly so in regional and remote locations where vacancies may be eventually filled with lesser qualified staff (with approval from the regulator). This shortage is likely to worsen even with a commitment to increasing the numbers of qualified staff through the quality agenda and framework and the National Partnership agreement with the NSW government. There are several contributing factors-

Pay Parity

Teaching is a profession in ECEC. There are comparable requirements upon undergraduate students at universities whether the qualification be for primary school education or ECEC. It can be argued that the requirements and responsibilities of the work subsequently performed once graduated and employed is probably greater for the teacher in an early childhood service than their school-based peers. A further argument can be made that the teacher's role in ECEC is more demanding professionally with higher requirements regarding the development of curriculum and assessment on site, rather than being set out by a central education department. The introduction of the NQS, including the EYLF, requires a level of skill and sophistication from the early childhood teacher to interpret and implement in the ECEC service, and to lead the teaching cohort in the service. These University trained teachers are likely to be the identified 'pedagogical leader/s' in the service as required by the National Quality Standard.

Continuity of staff
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Pay and conditions are not comparable between a teacher in a children's service to that of their peers in other parts of the education sector.

What is clear to practicing and prospective teachers is that the pay and conditions are not comparable between a teacher in a children's service to that of their peers in other parts of the education sector. A move to pay parity for teachers with that of their peers in other sectors of education, without a commensurate increase in government funding, would render many preschools unaffordable for the majority of families in their community with closures the likely result (as has already been the case), which would clearly undermine universal access and the quality reform agenda.

Funding for regional and remote areas, though higher than for metropolitan areas, is not sufficient to facilitate services to provide the necessary incentives to attract and retain teachers.

Conditions

Prospective teachers compare not only pay levels but working conditions across sectors. As most teaching positions that become available for new service teachers are in long day care, it is easy for them to make the clear distinction between the length of the workday (commonly 8 hours in LDC) and other conditions such as the availability of school holidays. This is a significant element in the predominant choice to take up primary teaching.

Career Choice

Teacher training courses in universities commonly cover the ages of 0 – 12 offering students the opportunity to choose between employment in schools that commence at kindergarten or ECEC services for 0 – school age. This provides choice for students and allows universities to combine students in core subjects and provide economies of scale for the training they provide, reducing the cost of provision. However, in most cases in NSW this choice results in students choosing primary teaching once they compare pay and conditions between ECEC (particularly LDC) and schools. Subsequently, there is insufficient regular supply of ECEC teachers flowing into the sector.

Responsibilities

New service teachers and undergraduates in the ECEC sector, having once experienced or sampled the planning and administrative requirements teaching in ECEC, will commonly point to the responsibilities for curriculum planning and documentation as a further reason they choose primary teaching instead of EC, or later as a career change having previously entered EC. Service Managers regularly report their disquiet at the lack of reasonable time available for the management, administrative and relationship requirements of the role.

University courses Practicum

The limited amount of practical experience available in courses is not sufficient to assist students gain a sound understanding of the application of knowledge and skill required in practice. On the job experience with suitable mentors is an important part of professional development.

Universities would report they have limited financial resources for course delivery that do not support additional or longer practicum placements.

Universities can find it difficult to find the required number of services willing and able to take on the assessment and mentoring of students for practicum. Universities routinely cannot fit an appropriate amount of time into the course for subjects relating to management and leadership, thus exacerbating the difficulties for teachers in service manager roles in ECEC services.

Recently announced Federal Budget initiatives in 2023-24 that provide financial assistance for early childhood educators to undertake a paid practicum in initial teacher education courses and support practicum exchange at a different service in a rural or remote location are a welcome initiative to boost practicum experience during undergraduate education.





Vocational education training (VET) courses provide pathways to employment

Vocational Education Training

Early childhood education and care continues to face pressing challenges surrounding skills and staff shortages. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority has identified the critical demand for more and better-skilled graduates in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. An additional 85,000 ECEC workers are expected to be required to raise Australia's system to the OECD average by 2030, and almost 260,000 new ECEC workers would be required if we are to emulate the Nordic countries (doubling the sector's total employment). Vocational training has an important job to do in supporting the sector by providing capable and dedicated workers to satisfy demand however, the VET sector enters the present tumultuous period having already experienced a profound and multidimensional crisis from policy failures and fiscal mismanagement during recent decades. These problems remain entrenched. Short-form, piecemeal units of study (including the current fad of 'micro credentials') have expanded, while accredited quality training has collapsed by over 500,000 enrolments since 2015. All VET enrolment growth over the last five years has been in non-accredited programs, which have grown by almost 70,000 enrolments since 2015. As a proportion of all enrolments by provider since 2015, the TAFE system has experienced the greatest losses. (Littleton, 2023).

Vocational education training (VET) courses provide pathways to employment including early childhood educator and educator in before and after school care programs. A wide range of full and part qualifications are available, including Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care and Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. The requirement for all staff to have a minimum of Certificate III under the NQS provided incentives for staff to either obtain a qualification or upgrade an existing one. In 2022 the NSW Government made available 25,000 fee-free training places for anyone seeking to gain skills in early childhood education. There remains opportunity for expansion in the vocational training area due to the numbers of staff that will be required in future years.

VET as an alternate to University or TAFE education programs is flexible with options which aligns with students' particular needs, circumstances and values, is accessible and suited to many people a range of study modes available. VET's key advantage is its practical focus, which cannot be underestimated when it comes to working in early childhood education. Practical placement enables students to experience what it's like being employed in a real workplace.

Eliza Littleton (2023) advocates a strong VET system with TAFE as its anchor is vital to supporting a dynamic, innovative economy, and to building more inclusive labour markets. The system requires urgent rebuilding to ensure it can support new skills development, job creation and opportunity – particularly for disadvantaged segments of the population. The creation of Jobs and Skills Australia is an important initiative for the future of vocational education and training (VET). If Australia is going to expand its ECEC system in line with the needs of working parents and employers, to match the level of provision of other industrial countries, ramping up high-quality vocational education for ECEC workers must be an immediate priority.

VET as an alternate to University or TAFE education programs is

Professional Learning

Federal Budget initiatives in 2023-24 that subsidise early childhood professionals to engage in professional learning are a positive step to improving access to professional learning. As many services within the sector are individual, independent services, professional isolation is a continuing challenge. Whereas teachers in schools are part of a cohort of teachers, EC staff may have little contact with others, particularly trained staff who need to continue to improve their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. Opportunities to have regular access to others in the field or more experienced and knowledgeable professionals is often limited by the cost to the service to facilitate professional learning and mentoring across a broad range of areas. As outlined previously, this is often being limited to engaging with children and not cover the broader areas of service provision such as governance and management, engaging with communities, collaboration and partnerships.

It is important there be opportunities to regularly connect with others in the sector, access to regular professional learning from skilled and knowledgeable professionals, both electronically and face-to-face, and access to a broad range of training relevant to service delivery including governance and management.

Children with additional needs

New service teachers often do not feel capable of appropriately supporting the specific needs of children with additional needs and are frustrated by the insufficient funding available to provide on-site assistance for children with more substantial, sustained needs. It is not uncommon for these pressures to lead to less qualified and able staff being assigned to work with these children, leading to a situation of managing behaviour rather than the implementation of supportive programs by skilled staff. In rural and remote communities a shortage of allied health staff, occupational therapists, speech therapists, audiologists and psychologists to name some, or a requirement to travel long distances for services often disadvantages children with additional needs. Delays in identifying and resolving barriers to learning impacts children's development profoundly.

ECEC staff also need access to information and professional learning opportunities to improve their knowledge and skill in relation to quality inclusive practices and the broad scope of additional needs, including those emotionally and socially based. It is also necessary for there to be regular access to support agencies that support sensitive inclusion and family centred practice. This also needs to be supported by appropriate funding to facilitate staff developing and evaluating programs on a continuous basis and providing for more regular engagement with children with higher level needs.

For further information regarding quality inclusive practice CCSA refers to Early Childhood Intervention Australia.



ECEC staff
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professional
learning
opportunities



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD teachers

Cultural competency is essential for staff that do not have knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history. Cultural competency is a beginning, a first step in understanding the situation and possible circumstances of Aboriginal communities in their area and more generally. It is common for Service Managers and staff to voice their concern regarding lack of knowledge, even where a willingness to connect and engage exists, which affects their confidence in regard to making adjustments in operation and practice. Lack of knowledge limits action because of the fear to offend.

It is essential to ensure that workforce development programs have the capacity to include specific education and support programs for these groups. It is not enough to simply say that they will be encouraged to participate in education programs. There is an apparently high level of incompleteness of teacher education programs by Aboriginal students. Culturally appropriate teacher education programs need to include support for access to programs, flexibility in delivery and support following graduation.

It is important that a deliberate, purposeful and sensitive program of upskilling staff in regional and remote areas is available and is provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The program needs to include expectations of the development of plans that include appropriate partnerships and strategies that include identifying and reporting progress and results. To ensure a beneficial change the work needs to be delivered by Aboriginal people or in partnership to demonstrate authenticity and integrity.

Community managed services, both generally and specific to early years services, can face challenges in relation to building and maintaining capability in governance and management. Though many are capable, those that experience these challenges are less able to change existing practices that can promote better access and engagement to increase enrolments of Aboriginal children. This is particularly the case where economic circumstances pressure sustainability. Regular access to information and support to develop and maintain governance and management capability has a direct impact on improving compliance and sustainability. This provides the opportunity to develop strategies that improve engagement with Aboriginal communities and subsequently increased Aboriginal enrolments.

An effective strategy in some services has been the employment of Aboriginal workers. The benefit is both for Aboriginal children through culturally sensitive practice and in being a liaison with local communities. Achieving positive results is not without its challenges due to the meeting of different cultures, the background and life experience of the individual/s, employment expectations and training requirements of the sector. A program that promotes and supports employment through information, ongoing support that includes flexible and supportive employment practices and supported training would provide improved outcomes. It would need to support registered training organisations (RTO's) to deliver in regional and remote areas in a culturally sensitive way in partnership with services and local communities.

It is important that a deliberate, purposeful and sensitive program of upskilling staff in regional and remote areas is available

Impact on access to quality ECEC, including by remoteness and access to flexible (non-standard hours) services.

The needs of families in regional and remote areas are very diverse due to the broad range of geographical, climatic, cultural, economic and family circumstances that exist. There are also many communities where populations fluctuate in response to the seasonal, climatic and the economic circumstance that exist at any given time. The early childhood (EC) delivery system, including funding arrangements, needs to be responsive to this diversity rather than being rigid and economically based. Funding needs to be flexible and support communities and their EC services in times where attendance numbers might be low or, in fact, will always be low due to the size of the community. A system that recognises the rights of all children and the diversity of circumstances is necessary for access to be equitable.

Whether different settings are required based on the location of services or family circumstances. It is important that children in rural and remote regions receive the same quality of service as their metropolitan counterparts if the national quality agenda and early years learning framework objectives are to be achieved. For example, it is not acceptable that children attending primary or secondary schools in regional and remote locations have university qualified teachers but children in ECEC often do not.

In smaller and more remote communities there are often fewer numbers of children and over a greater area, where accessing a service is difficult due to distance or difficult circumstances. The sustainability of a centre-based or mobile service in these circumstances is problematic due to both the current funding model and fluctuations in numbers. Different models of delivery should be explored so that access to a developmentally appropriate prior to school experience is available to these children.

CCSA considers there is a significant difference in life circumstances for those in remote geographical locations in comparison to those in areas identified as regional, and there would be benefit in separating them in policy. For example, in remote areas there are regularly few children of preschool age across a vast area making it problematic to focus policy narrowly on the years just prior to school and 'preschool-like' experiences for the delivery of services.

Commonly the time needed to travel significant distances to attend a service and taken away from business/farm commitments is prohibitive for remote families. The cost to mobile services to deliver to an individual family or small group is often seen by government as too high to be cost effective. This leads to families in these areas to comment that their children are valued less than others. The cost of travel for these families is also seen as prohibitive.



In smaller and more remote communities there are often fewer numbers of children and over a greater area,



Distance Preschools

Distance preschool is seen as an important component of the EC delivery system enabling children to connect and socialise with an appropriate EC curriculum. In New South Wales the provision is for children who live 48 kilometres or more from local early childhood education services, including community-based preschools, mobile children's services and, or long daycare. There was a view expressed by CCSA members that not all the children who could benefit from the program are able to access due to the limited number of places currently available and an expansion of places would increase the impact it can have. Concern was also raised in regard to the amount of face-to-face experiences for the children with the early childhood facilitator or with other children and there would be more benefit to children's learning if this is increased.

The current narrow prior to school funding focus on the year before school and universal access cannot meet the diverse and particular needs of families and children in remote locations. CCSA members were strong in their view that it is important that distance preschool be designed and delivered by university qualified early childhood teachers. It must deliver authentic play-based experiences based on the Early Years Learning Framework that provides children choice and autonomy and enables the development of positive dispositions for learning. Significant concern was voiced in relation to ensuring there is no 'push down' curriculum developed for primary aged children as is being experienced more generally in the EC sector, where programs are school based.

The program itself should be considered as a part of a broader view of education and development opportunities for children in remote locations in conjunction with the position outlined in question. Distance preschool should be part of a coordinated program and network of providing prior-to-school experiences by qualified EC practitioners through, and with, department schools and with EC providers including those currently funded such as mobiles. This would enable delivery through small and remote schools in a flexible model that also utilises existing resources in those communities. It would enable services to operate with small and fluctuating numbers.

Distance preschool becomes part of a co-ordinated, diverse and flexible program of remote delivery with EC providers that includes a broader range of prior-to-school experiences delivered on or from school sites utilising the departments infrastructure.

The program should be considered as a part of a broader view of education and development opportunities



Mobile Preschools

Mobile services are a critical delivery type in the overall early childhood system that includes a variety of delivery types to meet the broad range of family and child needs. They are well placed to deliver services that respond effectively to small communities and the changing circumstances of regional areas within which they are located. Their mobility enables servicing in more remote locations where distance and the number of children do not support more mainstream services such as those that are centre-based.

Mobile services fill the gap where more mainstream services are not viable. This includes:

- when the number of children in a community will always be low,
- enrolment numbers fluctuate, such as for seasonal or economic reasons,
- developing communities that are not yet able to support a more mainstream service, including regional centres that are experiencing growth.

Mobile services offer the flexibility to provide a range of prior-to-school experiences that respond to the diverse needs of communities. Their ability to provide preschool, playgroup and long day care provides responsiveness to actual and changing situations. Their mobility provides the opportunity to enter and withdraw from locations where suitable venues exist such as community halls and schools. In this regard it is important that funding models support the cost of withdrawing from one location and setting up in one where more children can benefit from the programs.

Mobile funding should acknowledge the particular needs of smaller communities and support the provision of a range of services and not be narrowly focused as is currently the case regarding universal access-based funding. Funding models should consider various early childhood pathways including playgroups, parenting programs such as Parent and Community Engagement (PACE) and EC community outreach programs. The focus on the preschool model does not support sustainability for those children who are yet to reach that age and will not be helped by services such as mobiles closing because of fluctuating numbers. Those fluctuations have always existed and will continue and funding arrangements need to respond to the actual situation for families in these regions.

It is important that all children are recognised in these models rather than a narrow focus on the year prior to school as currently exists. However, the benefit of a more flexible funding arrangement will mean that more children in their year prior to school have a program to attend. It is also important that mobile programs are developed and implemented by qualified early childhood professionals. Certainty of funding also supports the recruitment and retention of staff in these programs enabling children to benefit from this continuity, as outlined as an important element in the EYLF.

Mobile services fill the gap where more mainstream services are not viable.



It is important that children in these regions receive the same quality of service as their metropolitan counterparts.

Preschool Affordability/Funding (NSW)

Education for school aged children is supported by government funding at a much greater level than that in EC. In NSW in particular, the level of state funding support provided to community managed preschools has consistently been shown to be far below that of other jurisdictions whilst preschools provided by the Department of Education and Training are effectively supported at a much higher rate, resulting in significant differences in fees charged. Long Day Centres, whilst not directly funded, are assisted by the availability of the federal Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate to families. This is not available to state funded, community managed preschools.

Funding levels have meant providers (predominantly small, independent community run services) must either increase fees, or decrease costs, or both to remain viable, the latter being very common. This financial imperative has been a significant contributor in suppressing pay levels in what is effectively a 'user pays' system as compared to government funded schools and preschools.

Capacity to pay has a greater impact on lower socio-economic and regional and remote areas. This effect is clear in NSW when comparing the number of children prior to school age accessing community-based services, mostly 'preschools', to those accessing government funded 'preschool' provided via education departments in other jurisdictions. The introduction of Affordable Preschool funding to preschools in NSW has reduced out of pocket expenses for the first 600 hours of preschool.

The operation and adequacy of the market, including types of care and the roles of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, and the appropriate role for government.

Competition & Supply

Early childhood has been an open market for some time with no planning restrictions as to the number or location of centres. It has not been uncommon for there to be an oversupply of LDC places in some communities leading to lower occupancy levels which places cost pressures on a centre's operation. These pressures lead to a natural market tendency to keep costs low including limiting wage increases.

It would assist the provision and sustainability of regional communities to developing and/or extend models of provision such as mobile services and alternate governance structures that will provide sustainability for smaller communities such as clusters and multi-auspice. This will address, and likely significantly improve, the current workforce challenges.

It is important that children in these regions receive the same quality of service as their metropolitan counterparts. It is not acceptable that children attending schools in regional remote have university educated teachers but children in ECEC often do not.

Status & 'Child Care'

The predominance of long day care centres in the sector has been a contributing factor in changing the public perception of ECEC. There has been a transition from the concept of 'education' when the sector was dominated by preschools to that of 'care', particularly with it continuously being tied to workforce participation, economic outcomes and assessment in relation to productivity. It is no surprise there is limited public knowledge of the importance of having highly trained professionals working with young children in all settings. Though there is now strong research evidence supporting qualified professionals working with children birth to school age this message still needs to grow outside the immediate sector.

It is important the inquiry acknowledge that the ECEC sector has diverse governance and management structures. Governance bodies, for example, include individual owners/businesses, corporations, community based organisations, local government, religious based organisations, large benevolent organisations, work-based organisations, universities and TAFEs. This creates very different roles for on-site managers (service managers) who are rarely trained in management or have the experience to effectively manage a small business. If we are to deliver quality education to children and families in the sector, we need to acknowledge the need for managers to know and understand the different governance structures and mechanisms and be able to manage EC services effectively within these structures. It is important this is recognised as a facilitator of quality in addition to the role of educators and allied professionals employed by these organisations.

It also should be recognised that the capacity to govern and manage from an organisational perspective varies widely. The community based and volunteer structures, while providing significant community and social benefits in excess of desired educational outcomes for children, regularly struggle to develop, and retain, the capacity to govern and manage effectively over sustained periods. Impacts on the economy, including workforce participation, productivity and budgetary implications.

Community managed ECEC services make a significant contribution to their communities and have done so for many decades. They continuously develop and maintain social capital for both individuals and communities as a whole and are often the hub that supports parents and families sustain healthy outcomes.



Community managed ECEC services make a significant contribution to their communities





Summary

CCSA proposes the following actions to strengthen the ECEC sector and deliver better outcomes for children.

1. Ensure professionals with university teacher training have pay parity with their peers and others have remuneration comparable to the value of the work performed.
2. Funding community-based preschools using a method that has, as its basis, having university trained teachers working in primary contact roles and provides affordable fees for families. (NSW)
3. Implement planning controls to ensure that the number and placement of centres meets community expectations, offers a level of choice for parents according to their needs and guarantees a quality experience for children. This system needs to recognise that educating children should not be subject to the same market forces as the setting up of a milk bar or butcher shop.
4. Ensure teaching training occurs only in universities and not by providers at a vocational level. This will likely mean facilitating an increase in the intake number of undergraduates.
5. Provide funding that supports an increase in the number of qualified staff required in the sector through providers that are regularly and rigorously assessed and accredited by skilled and experienced professional in the sector. This will likely include minimum times in which these qualifications can be completed and an increased amount of practicum experience.
6. Promote the value and ECEC and the components of quality ECEC through the media.
7. Increase capacity in governance and management through appropriate funding to support agencies with contemporary knowledge to provide specific training, information and on-going support to staff and management in organisations that includes governance structures and collaborative management.
8. Investigation/implementation and/or development of cluster/multi-auspice models with provision of appropriate levels of seed and recurrent funds.
9. Introduce funding levels for rural and remote communities that reflect the higher costs of service delivery to overcome the identified barriers to providing quality services including the provision of incentives.
10. Financial and professional support to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students to access and complete university teaching training.
11. For government to acknowledge and support the contribution and extended social and community benefits of the not-for-profit sector, particularly community managed, and provide access to specific support regarding governance and management that will develop and maintain sustainability and therefore better workforce outcomes. This will include knowledge and information regarding 'Collaborative Management'.
12. The delivery system, including funding models, recognise the changing circumstances and situations in smaller communities and provide flexibility that supports sustainability and therefore equity for families



13. A strategy that supports raising cultural competency within EC services be developed and implemented. This should include access to quality resources and support for services to increase their capability to include Aboriginal children and families.
14. Integrated services are achieving positive results through their relationship and proximity to associated services such as health. It suggests that other services could benefit from strong relationships with local Aboriginal services where these relationships can be facilitated through local Aboriginal people or bodies that can scaffold their development and that of early years' services generally.
15. A specific program be developed to promote and support the employment of Aboriginal educators that enables services to develop an employment strategy that acknowledges and responds to cultural differences and meets employment and sector requirements including training and gaining qualifications.

Conclusion

CCSA supports the work of the productivity commission and welcomes the opportunity to contribute. Its position in the sector enables a significant understanding of the issues that will be addressed in the inquiry. CCSA would welcome further opportunities to assist and support the work the commission is charged with regarding the Early Childhood Development Workforce.

Reference

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