

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

May 15, 2023

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network¹ (AECTEN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

AECTEN comprises leaders of early childhood teacher education degree programs in the higher education sector across Australia. It has five branches: New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory; Victoria; Queensland; Western Australia/Northern Territory; and South Australia/Tasmania, representing in total, 42 higher education institutions. Established in October 2016, AECTEN advocates for the delivery of high-quality early childhood initial teacher education and seeks to inform national policy on key issues relating to early childhood education and the early childhood teacher workforce. In December 2017 AECTEN began operating as a network of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. AECTEN upholds the internationally accepted definitions of early childhood – understood to cover birth to eight years of age – and early childhood teachers as degree-qualified teachers equipped to teach children from birth and up to eight years.

Given AECTEN’s remit, our submission focuses on the development of a high-quality ECEC system in Australia through the supply of a quality and appropriately remunerated early childhood teacher (ECT) workforce.

1. Introduction

1.1 AECTEN applauds the Australian Government’s recognition of ECEC as a critical component of Australia’s education system and welcomes the Commission’s brief to develop recommendations that will support high-quality ECEC and children’s learning and development.

1.2 It will be critical that recommendations align with the vision of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, which recognises the critical role quality early childhood education plays in the meeting of its vision for “a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face” (p. 3). We welcome recommendations that will support the commitment made by all governments in this Declaration to “strengthening early childhood education” (p. 7).

1.3. Early childhood teachers contribute significantly to the quality of ECEC settings². Recommendations will therefore need to target the attraction, retention, and appropriate

¹ See p. 7 for a list of AECTEN members and institutions.

² Degotardi, S. (2010). High-quality interactions with infants: Relationships with early childhood practitioners’ interpretations and qualification levels in play and routine contexts. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18(1), 27–41; Manning, M. et al. (2019). Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the ECEC environment? *Review of*

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

remuneration of quality early childhood teachers, and increasing recognition in policy and public spheres of the critical work that they do.

2. Marginalisation of ECTs in policy

2.1 Even more than primary and secondary teachers, early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school ECEC settings have long experienced low status. There remains in the community and concerningly, in policy contexts, the perceptions that: working with young children is akin to babysitting; learning starts with formal schooling; and ‘real’ teachers are employed in schools. Such perceptions require debunking within governments and the Australian community more broadly.

2.2 The recognition by governments in Australia that quality early education matters is compromised by policies and policy approaches that diminish the value of quality early education and ECTs.

2.2.1 The Early Years Strategy is a welcome wholistic approach to improving young children’s education, health, and wellbeing outcomes, yet its Advisory Panel does not include a specialist early childhood education academic.

2.2.2 Early childhood teachers who work with children birth-five years, especially those employed in non-school ECEC settings, were paid scant attention in the recent Quality Initial Teacher Education Review³ and the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan⁴.

2.2.3 Australia still lacks a national system of teacher registration that includes and reflects the work of birth-five ECTs. This is contrary to the call for ‘One Teaching Profession’ promoted in the 2018 Review of Teacher Registration in Australia, which stated, “A consistent theme in our consultations has been that teachers want to be considered part of one profession” (p. i)⁵.

2.3 AECTEN supports one national register for early childhood, primary, and secondary teachers. We regard that a teacher is a teacher regardless of the age of children they teach, their education context (e.g., long day care, preschool, early years of school) or where they live. Recent research⁶ that investigated early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the efficacy of teacher registration showed a clear preference to be registered under a national system that was overseen by AITSL and ACECQA, with revised professional teaching standards that better reflected the work early childhood teachers do with children aged birth–five years.

Educational Research, 89(3), 370–415. doi:10.3102/0034654319; Tayler, C. (2016). https://education.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2929452/E4Kids-Report-3.0_WEB.pdf

³ <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/announcements/final-report-quality-initial-teacher-education-review>

⁴ <https://www.education.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/resources/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan>

⁵ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-review-of-teacher-registration/report/one-teaching-profession---teacher-registration-in-australia.pdf>

⁶ Fenech, M., Watt, H. (2022). Quality early childhood education through self, workplace, or regulatory support: exploring the efficacy of professional registration for early childhood teachers in Australia. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00575-8>

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

3. ECT shortages

3.1 A shortage of degree-qualified teachers is a significant and entrenched barrier to quality ECEC in Australia⁷.

3.2 Low wages, including the salaries of ECTs employed in non-school settings being up to \$30,000 less than teachers employed in schools⁸, is a key barrier to attracting and retaining ECTs in the profession.

3.3 The action in Australia's Early Childhood Workforce Strategy⁹, to "investigate options for improving workforce pay and conditions" (p. 9) within a three-year time frame is too little too late. More immediate and substantive action is required.

3.4 AECTEN is heartened by the recent Fair Work Commission's interim decision for a 15% pay increase for the aged care workforce, and the Australian Government's funding of this increase¹⁰. Comparative industrial and policy approaches to the wages of ECTs, particularly those working with children birth-five years in non-school settings, is urgently needed.

3.5 There is incredible diversity in the early childhood teacher education programs offered by member institutions, with a focus on birth – five years, birth – eight years, or birth – 12 years. Respective graduates are eligible to teach in early childhood education and care non-school settings only (birth – five); early childhood education and care non-school settings, school-based preschools/kindergartens, *and* the early phase of school (birth – eight); or in early childhood education and care non-school settings, school-based preschools/kindergartens, *and* primary school (birth – 12). The experience of AECTEN members, reflected in research¹¹, is that the majority of graduates of birth-eight and birth-12 ITE programs choose to work in schools, most often citing professional standing and remuneration as the reason for their choice. Further, for some graduates of these programs who do teach in non-school settings, this can be to 'buy time' until they can secure a teaching position in a school. These issues appear exacerbated in jurisdictions such as Western Australia, Tasmania, and the ACT where preschool/kindergarten (early education for children aged three-five years) is part of the formal school system.

3.6 While there are challenges to the recruitment and retention of specialist early childhood teachers in schools, these are heightened in early childhood non-school settings. Key barriers

⁷ [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf)

[10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf);

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/education-workforce-early-childhood/report/early-childhood-report.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.ieu.asn.au/news-publications/news/2018/01-3-1/news-release-heres-why-early-childhood-teachers-need-pay-rise>

⁹ [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf)

[10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf)

¹⁰ [https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/budget-2023-24-delivering-the-largest-ever-pay-rise-to-aged-care-](https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/budget-2023-24-delivering-the-largest-ever-pay-rise-to-aged-care-workers#:~:text=The%20Government%20recognises%20the%20complex,increase%20for%20aged%20care%20workers.)

[workers#:~:text=The%20Government%20recognises%20the%20complex,increase%20for%20aged%20care%20workers.](https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/budget-2023-24-delivering-the-largest-ever-pay-rise-to-aged-care-workers#:~:text=The%20Government%20recognises%20the%20complex,increase%20for%20aged%20care%20workers.)

¹¹ Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2021, online first). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

extending beyond initial teacher education prohibit attracting suitable preservice teachers and retaining them in the profession post-graduation¹², the most significant being low wages. As per 3.2, ECTs employed in early childhood non-school settings have long experienced a lack of pay parity with teachers employed in schools, earning up to \$30,000 less than their primary and secondary counterparts despite having equivalent teaching qualifications and, in most jurisdictions, being professionally registered and accountable to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. AECTEN believes that until pay parity is established, attracting and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood teachers will remain a critical barrier to the provision of high-quality early childhood education, irrespective of any other strategies that are put into place.

3.7 AECTEN welcomes initiatives from the recent federal Budget to financially support preservice ECTs to undertake a paid practicum. We know anecdotally that professional experience is a critical element of teacher education but one that can present a real barrier for students, especially those who are upgrading from other qualifications and are already working within the sector.

4. ECT supply and quality

4.1 The shortage of ECTs has led to a relaxing of ECT regulatory requirements. For example,

4.1.1 Under Regulation 242, until December 2024, educators in some jurisdictions who have not completed an ECT-degree qualification can be employed as ECTs¹³.

4.1.2 Also until December 2024, secondary and primary registered teachers with a Certificate III or Diploma in ECE will also be recognised as ECT-equivalent¹⁴.

4.2 While cognisant of the attraction and retention issues facing the sector, we are concerned that relaxing ECT requirements in these ways diminishes the value of degree-qualified ECTs and band aids the ECT supply crisis. Maintaining ECT regulatory requirements as intended in the National Quality Framework to lift service and sector quality would certainly have exacerbated the crisis, but perhaps may have been needed to prompt the urgent reforms needed to attract, retain and sustain ECTs. It is hard to envisage a situation where a shortage of school teachers would lead to watered down teacher qualification requirements. That this has happened in the early childhood education space seems indicative of an undermining of both quality early education and early childhood teachers.

4.3 Governments, higher education institutions, and ECE providers are investing substantive funds to increase the supply of ECTs but are doing so in the absence of an evidence base around teacher quality. It is unknown, for example, whether current initiatives to increase the ECT pipeline support ECT supply *and quality*.

¹² ACECQA (2021); Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2021, online first). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

¹³ https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/Information%20sheet%20-%20Educators%20who%20are%20actively%20working%20towards%20a%20qualification%2072_73%20July%202023.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/requirements/children-preschool-age-or-under/recognition-as-an-equivalent-early-childhood-teacher>

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

4.3.1 While some initial teacher education (ITE) programs qualify graduates to teach children aged birth-five, the majority are birth-eight or birth-12 focussed, providing graduates with a dual-career qualification to teach in ECE settings and primary schools. EC ITE programs vary markedly in relation to: duration (from three to four-year undergraduate and one to two-year postgraduate degrees); the awarding of credit for previous study (from two units to two years of study); the extent of course content that focuses on early childhood; and professional experience with children birth-five years (minimum of 40 and maximum of 90 days)¹⁵.

4.3.2 In the context of increasing diversity in birth-five, birth-eight, and birth-12 early childhood initial teacher education (ITE) programs in Australia, it is unclear which program features best support student retention and graduate quality.

4.3.3 We note, however, that the offering of dual birth-12 years early childhood/primary ITE programs can be problematic for a number of reasons: limited/inadequate coverage of early education specific to birth-five years; limited professional experience and internships with the birth-five age group; and the offering of a pathway away from early childhood non-school settings (birth-five) into schools. Research has shown that employers of early childhood teachers in NSW (where only birth-five and birth-12 ITE programs are offered) consider graduates of birth-five programs to be the best prepared to work with children of this age group¹⁶. We acknowledge that internationally, early childhood education spans birth – eight years, recognising the contribution that specialist early childhood teachers make to early learning in non-school settings, the early phase of school, and the transition between these settings. We also acknowledge the variability of attention to the early years in birth-12 programs across jurisdictions, and the importance of these broader programs, particularly in universities situated in rural and remote areas where flexibility is needed across early childhood school and non-school settings.

4.3.4 Large-scale research is urgently needed to establish an evidence base around which ECTs make a difference, why, and how¹⁷. Work in this area is underway, with a national survey of the career motivations, aspirations, and trajectories of first and final year students enrolled in a B-5, B-8, or B-12 undergraduate or postgraduate teaching program being administered. Pilot work to develop a *Teachers in Early Education (TEE)* tool designed to assess the quality of B-5 ECTs in the context in which they are working, is also progressing¹⁸.

¹⁵ Boyd, W. (2020). *Australian ECT programs: Perspectives & comparisons*. Springer.

¹⁶ Boyd, W., Wong, S., Fenech, M., Warren, J., Mahony, L., Lee, I-F., & Cheeseman, S. (2020). Employers' perspectives of how well prepared early childhood teacher graduates are to work in early childhood education and care services, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*.45(3), 215-227 DOI: 10.1177/1836939120935997

¹⁷ Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2021, online first). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

¹⁸ Contact marianne.fenech@sydney.edu.au for findings from the national survey and updates on the development of the TEE tool.

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

Thank you for considering this submission, and we look forward to reading draft recommendations in the November preliminary report.

Associate Professor Marianne Fenech
AECTEN Co-Chair

| STATE/TERRITORY BRANCH | CHAIR /CONTACTS |
|--|---|
| <p>NSW/ACT ACT Australian Catholic University (ACT) Canberra University</p> <p>NSW</p> | <p>Chair Associate Professor Wendy Boyd (NSW)</p> |

AECTEN

Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Australian Catholic University (NSW) Avondale College Charles Sturt University Excelsia College Macquarie University Notre Dame University Southern Cross University TAFE NSW The University of Newcastle The University of Wollongong University of New England University of Sydney Western Sydney University</p> | <p><i>AECTEN Co-Chair</i> Associate Professor Marianne Fenech</p> |
| <p>QLD Australian Catholic University (QLD) Central Queensland University Griffith University Queensland University of Technology University of Southern Cross University of Southern Queensland University of Sunshine Coast</p> | <p><i>Co-Chairs</i> Associate Professor Megan Gibson Associate Professor Kym Simoncini</p> |
| <p>SOUTH AUSTRALIA /TAS <i>South Australia</i> Flinders University University of South Australia <i>Tasmania</i> University of Tasmania</p> | <p><i>Chair</i> Dr Rachael Hedger Dr Susie Raymond Dr Frances Fan</p> |
| <p>VICTORIA Australian Catholic University (VIC) Box Hill Institute Deakin University Federation University Holmesglen Institute La Trobe University Melbourne Polytechnic Monash University RMIT University Swinburne University of Technology Victoria University</p> | <p><i>Chair</i> Dr Eloise (Elly) Thomson Dr Elise Hunkin</p> |
| <p>WESTERN AUSTRALIA/NORTHERN TERRITORY Curtin University Edith Cowan University Murdoch University Notre Dame <i>Northern Territory</i> Charles Darwin University Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</p> | <p><i>AECTEN Co-Chair</i> Associate Professor Gill Kirk Dr Georgina Nutton</p> |