



## **Response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report: A Pathway to Universal ECEC Teachers in Early Education Chief Investigators**

February 13, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report.

We are a team of established Australian academics with collective expertise in early childhood education, early childhood workforce, initial early childhood teacher (ECT) education, and education psychology. In 2023 we were awarded funding from the Australian Research Council to investigate factors that attract, prepare, retain, and sustain a supply of *quality* ECTs. In Australia. This *Teachers in Early Education (TEE)* study comprises a longitudinal (2024-2027) tracking of the career motivations, intentions, satisfaction, efficacy, and wellbeing of students enrolled in their first or final year of an early childhood teacher education program, and the development of a tool to be used to assess the quality of an ECT's practice in the context in which they are working. Pilot work for the study was undertaken in 2023.

We welcome the Commission's positioning of children at the centre of its recommendations and are heartened by the Report's emphasis on *quality* early childhood education and care (ECEC). We also support the Commission's recommendation that governments "prioritise the workforce challenges facing the sector" (p. 2). The longstanding need for a quality, stable ECEC workforce will only grow given government initiatives in some jurisdictions (e.g., NSW and Victoria) – and indeed the recommendation of the Report – to make ECEC more affordable and accessible.

Notwithstanding these workforce pressures, we urge the Commission to restrain their recommendation that "ECEC educators who are studying to become teachers should be offered accelerated pathways and greater flexibility to complete their qualifications while working" (p. 2).

As you are aware, there is an incredible and increasing diversity in the provisioning of initial teacher education programs in Australia. Yet such provisioning has progressed at a rapid rate, and notably, in the absence of an evidence base that shows what program features best support graduate quality.

Our research is intended to inform this evidence gap.

Last year, CIs Fenech, Durksen and Wong administered the first of four waves of the TEE survey to first and final year EC student teachers. A total of 587 students from 45 institutions

across Australia completed the survey, most of whom (96%) stated that they intended to complete their degree.

Despite having what we refer to as a sample of 'Stayers', preliminary results indicate potential compromises between certain program features (including accelerated programs and Birth-12 offerings) and both graduate quality and supply. We found that:

- Students for whom teaching is their 'first career choice' are least likely to have 'teaching children aged birth – five years' as their first career choice **if they are enrolled in a Birth-12** (52%, compared to 70% for Birth-8 and 88% for Birth-5).
- Students enrolled in a Birth-12 program had significantly lower 'motivation, program engagement, adaptability, and self-efficacy scores' than students in Birth-5 programs. All of these variables are associated with quality teaching.
- Students with experience as paid ECEC employees (including diploma-qualified educators) and those enrolled in one-year ECT programs, had low teacher self-efficacy scores.

As early childhood academics with years of experience as leaders of initial teacher education programs, we are also concerned by what we have observed is an increasing casualisation of early childhood academic teaching staff, and subjects being taught by staff without specialist qualifications and / or experience in early childhood education. Increased offerings of accelerated programs are not being matched by increased employment of permanent early childhood academics.

The Draft Report is right to assert that "Quality is paramount to achieving the benefits of ECEC" (p.2). It is critical, therefore, that efforts to boost the supply of ECTs are supported by initial teacher education programs that are evidence-based and support graduates who are well prepared to make a positive difference in the development and wellbeing of young children.

Yours sincerely,

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