

ACU Submission to the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Productivity Commission

Introduction

The Childcare and Early Learning Productivity Commission Draft Report (Productivity Commission, 2014) invites responses and information requests from the early childhood education and care sector. The Report acknowledges **the significance of quality early learning experiences on children's developmental outcomes**. The report also acknowledges **the impact the availability of quality care has on levels of female workforce participation**. Accordingly recommendations are made regarding the provision of early childhood education and care services for children in terms of staff qualifications and child-to-staff ratios, across childhood services providers and in terms of government funding of services.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a provider of initial and postgraduate teacher education and has research expertise in early childhood teacher education, the early childhood workforce, early childhood service leadership, children's learning and development, and the provision of high quality play-based learning experiences. ACU commends the Draft Report recommendations with respect to:

- maintaining Universal Access to four-year-old kindergarten education (Recommendation 12.9)
- funding the Disadvantaged Communities and Inclusion Support Programs (Recommendation 12.6)
- maintaining funding for children assessed as 'at risk' with a diagnosed disability, and for Indigenous children (Recommendations 12.7, 12.8, 12.9)
- maintaining RTO levels of quality for ECEC-related training through ASQA audits (Recommendation 11.1)
- linking the provision of programming for children with additional needs to research informed practice (Recommendation 13.2).
- harmonising background safety checks on early childhood educators and volunteers nationally (Recommendation 7.10)
- the removal of food safety requirements in the National Regulations that overlap with existing state and territory requirements (Recommendation 7.11).

In this response to the Draft Report, ACU focuses on three recommendations and three information requests.

Response to recommendations and information requests

***INFORMATION REQUEST 5.1:** What are the optimal hours of attendance at preschool to ensure children's development and what is the basis for this?*

US research suggests that children's cognitive, reading and mathematics outcomes are increased with higher levels of access to preschool education. In a randomised controlled trial (Robin, Frede & Barnett, 2006), children from a lower socio-economic community attending eight hours of pre-school education a week, when compared with a group attending for three hours per week, showed

increased developmental outcomes in the areas of cognitive development and pre-literacy. In another study (Leob, et al., 2007), lower-income children were shown to significantly benefit from longer hours of early education, with middle-class children shown to benefit from a minimum of half-day attendance. Fifteen hours per week of universal access optimises access to early learning by qualified educators for children across the socio-economic spectrum. This is consistent with a review of research into pre-school provision, including duration, intensity, and quality, which concluded that “preschool policies should strive to foster the establishment of equal educational opportunities” (Burger, 2010).

The Productivity Commission Draft Report argues that research indicates different outcomes for children less than three-years-of-age attending child care, when compared with outcomes for children over three-years-of-age attending preschools. The report cites the work of Harrison et al. (2009), which used data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) to examine outcomes for birth and preschool cohorts of children attending child care. The report argues that the LSAC data demonstrates children who have longer hours in care before three years-of-age had lower academic achievements in school. A closer reading of Section 8 of the LSAC data demonstrates that infants having between nine and twenty hours of care and education are *less* likely to have negative outcomes if they begin care and education in the birth to three month age range, when compared with those who commence when aged in the six- to nine-month age range. Furthermore, infants in exclusively parental care were more likely to fall in the ‘concern’ range in communication skills, when compared with infants receiving informal care. There was no significant relationship between concerns in infant communication skills and each additional four hours of non-parental care, and no link between care and education arrangements and pro-social behaviour rated by parents for four- to five-year-olds. Children who attended care and education for eight to 31 hours a week had higher literacy and numeracy skills.

***DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.9:** Dedicated preschools should be removed from the scope of the National Quality Framework and regulated by state and territory governments under the relevant education legislation. The quality standards in state and territory education legislation should broadly align with those in the National Quality Framework. Long day care services that deliver preschool programs should remain within the National Quality Framework.*

The early childhood education sector understands early education and early childhood care as integrally related. Removing dedicated preschools from the scope of the NQF would create a binary between the provision of care and education in the sector. This will undermine the developing professionalism of the field and the capacity of long-day care settings to recruit four-year qualified staff to their services in order to meet Universal Access requirements, as staff will be more inclined to work in dedicated preschools. In its preparation of early childhood teacher education graduates, ACU emphasises the close and dynamic relationship between high quality care environments and positive education outcomes for young children.

***DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.2:** Requirements for educators in centre-based services should be amended by governments such that:*

- *all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III, or equivalent*
- *the number of children for which an early childhood teacher must be employed is assessed on the basis of the number of children in a service aged over 36 months.*

Research shows that a commencement age of two- to three-years has positive impacts on children's cognitive and literacy learning outcomes (Leob, et al, 2007). This represents children in the 24- to 36-month age bracket. Research cited in the Draft Report also emphasises the significance of brain development in the first three years of life. In particular, the Draft Report notes that relationships and interactions with caregivers impact on the quality of learning experiences shaping children's experiences in the first three years of life.

Recent evidence indicates there are critical developmental time periods during which central nervous system neuro-circuitry may be particularly susceptible to environmental influences. More highly-qualified educators are able to provide more positive learning environment for children, in turn improving children's outcomes. A significant component of learning environments for children under three years of age is the quality of interactions between adults and the child that contribute to the development and maintenance of high quality care and education relationships. The neurobiological research clearly demonstrates that the quality of relationships between adult and child is a key predictor of long term outcomes (Feldman et al., 2007; Hofer, 2006; Mayes, Magidson, Lejeuz, & Nicholls, 2009; Meaney, 2010; Perry, 2006).

Certificate III qualifications are a base level qualification in which detailed knowledge of children's developmental capacities in the early years, and the provision of quality experiences likely to foster brain development, are not covered to the same depth as at Diploma and Degree level. Children aged 36 months and under will be **educationally and developmentally shorted-changed** by a minimum educator qualification at the level of Certificate III.

INFORMATION REQUEST 7.1: The Commission seeks participants' views on the expected impacts on the development of children under 36 months of focusing required teachers in centre-based care on children over 36 months.

Focussing required teachers in centre-based care on children aged over 36 months will dramatically limit the access under-three-year-olds have to qualified educators. Working with children aged six weeks to 36 months is physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding work. It requires that educators have the capacity to notice and respond to infant cues in the areas of language, social, cognition and emotional development. It requires strong capacity for planning age-appropriate and stimulating learning experiences that promote brain development. A lack of higher-qualified teachers working with infants and toddlers will reduce opportunities for these children to benefit from early learning as they progress through the early childhood education sector and into school.

The research evidence is clear that staff qualifications are critical to subsequent child outcomes. Research indicates that "...When teachers hold a bachelor's degree and have specialized training in early childhood education, they are better able to support children's healthy development and school readiness" (Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010, p. 1). Australian research shows that more highly qualified early childhood staff are able to engage in higher quality interactions with infants (Degotardi, 2010). A review of qualifications across the United States of America indicated (Saracho & Spodek, 2007, p. 87) that "...teachers' qualifications (based on measures of knowledge, education and experience) accounted for a larger share of the variance in students' achievement than any other single factor".

Given the importance of staff qualifications in shaping the quality of learning environments for young children, coupled with international recognition that learning experiences in the early years lay a foundation for life-long learning and well-being, it is clear that qualifications for those working with children under three-years-of-age are crucial and must be maintained at the highest level possible. The Draft Report recommends that "... LDC services should be able to provide care for children under 36 months without the oversight of a teacher and these children should not be included in the count towards the requirement to hire an early childhood teacher (ECT). This would allow ECTs to focus on

children aged 36 months and over. The Commission also considers that all LDC workers caring for children aged under 36 months should be required to hold or be actively working towards a certificate III or equivalent (the same qualification expected of family day care educators), rather than half of these educators being required to hold or be working towards a diploma level qualification” (p. 277). This recommendation is clearly counter to robust research evidence that supports the need for high levels of expertise amongst those working with the youngest children.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.5: To provide services with greater flexibility to meet staffing requirements, ACECQA should:

- *remove the requirement that persons with early childhood teacher qualifications must have practical experience for children aged birth to twenty four months*
- *explore ways to make the requirements for approving international qualifications simpler and less prescriptive in order to reduce obstacles to attracting appropriately qualified educators from overseas.*

Early childhood education covers the period of childhood from birth to eight-years-of-age. Early childhood teacher qualifications include practical experience for children aged birth to twenty-four months to ensure graduates have a comprehensive understanding of the entire early childhood period. Attracting appropriately qualified educators from overseas is a suitable response to workforce shortages, provided that minimum qualification standards are maintained.

ACU recognises that not all qualified early childhood educators choose to work with children under three years of age (p.282). This does not, however, provide a rationale for differentiating training between those who are qualified to work with children aged from birth to eight years versus those who are qualified to work with three- to eight-year-olds. The claim that focusing across the age range from birth to eight-years-of-age in teacher preparation courses limits the pool of staff willing to work in the sector (p.282) is not supported by research evidence. Rather, evidence suggests there is a range of factors limiting the attraction and retention of early childhood educators; poor pay and conditions, and low status are the most influential of these (Bretherton, 2010; Productivity Commission, 2011; Sims, 2007).

INFORMATION REQUEST 12.10: The Commission seeks views on how best to transition to full state and territory responsibility for preschool delivered in long day care services as well as in dedicated preschools. This includes a transition to the provision of preschool at no cost to parents, in those dedicated preschools attached to public primary schools.

Considerable efforts have been made in OECD countries to bring together government responsibility for the provision of early childhood services for children from birth to 8 years of age (in New Zealand, for example, preschool and child care services have been governed from within a single Ministry of Education since 1986). The recommendation that preschools within long day care (LDC) services should become the responsibility of states and territories alongside dedicated preschools, while responsibility for child care provision remains at the federal level, reinscribes Australia’s long-standing failure to demonstrate that it understands the necessity of fully integrating the provision of education and care services. Such a move also risks undermining the developing professionalism of the field. This is predicated on the growing parity of understandings and expectations internationally between LDC and preschool services in relation to work with young children. ACU does not support this further fracturing of the early childhood field. The University recommends that government involvement in early childhood education, across dedicated preschools and LDC services, be brought together under a single jurisdiction.

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